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WALT WHITMAN

BY

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AN ORSON OF THE MUSE

Her son, albeit the Muse's livery
And measured courtly paces rouse his taunts,
Naked and hairy in his savage haunts,
To Nature only will he bend the knee;
Spouting the founts of her distillery
Like rough rock-sources; and his woes and wants
Being Nature's, civil limitation daunts
His utterance never; the nymphs blush, not he.
Him, when he blows of Earth, and Man, and Fate,
The Muse will hearken to with graver ear
Than many of her train can waken: him
Would fain have taught what fruitful things and dear
Must sink beneath the tidewaves, of their weight,
If in no vessel built for sea they swim.

GEORGE MEREDITH.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

More than a generation has passed since Walt Whitman died. The time is come when more and more the attempt will be made, and may hopefully be made, to estimate his permanent place among the writers of the English language. I do not say, I do not think, that the time has yet come for registering a verdict that can confidently expect to stand without fearing serious modification in the future. It will come, no doubt. To suppose that such verdicts are not attained or attainable is only a piece of the curious intellectual anarchy of our time. The truth is that literary judgements have proved themselves at least as stable as those of history or politics, philosophy or science. No one who is capable of forming an opinion on such questions supposes that there can ever again be any serious question about the poetic rank of Aeschylus or Dante or Shakespeare or Milton. Indeed such doubts as have arisen in the past have commonly been due either to ignorance of the poet's language, as in the case of Shakespeare, or to reactions and prejudices unconnected with literature, as in the case of Dante. In each case the literary judgement formed immediately or within a generation by those best competent to

decide has finally triumphed. Criticism may indeed continue the work of elucidation, may bring out new details of judgement or modify old ones. But the broad facts and the main impression have long ago been settled; and nothing alters about these fixed stars of the literary firmament except their new relation to each new and differing generation of civilized men. Whitman has certainly not yet reached this position. And it is one of the results of that lack of any literary education which was in part his strength and in part his weakness that he never understood that any one had, and constantly supposed that the "pioneers" and journalists of the new world could revise these ancient and settled verdicts by their natural genius unassisted by any knowledge of the long history either of art or of any other manifestation of human life. That is not so. Genius is much greater than knowledge, but it can seldom be a substitute for it. Whitman, himself a man of genius, was always blundering ludicrously when he pronounced his confident judgements on great writers for judging whom he in fact possessed no materials at all. When he writes of Goethe that "he passes with the general crowd upon whom the American glance descends with indifference", he is of course merely making himself ridiculous. Neither he, nor "the American glance", nor indeed any other glance —English, French, Italian, or even German—can see Goethe. He takes a good deal of hard looking at; and not merely looking at. The eyes that are to see the whole of such men as Goethe or Milton must bring a good deal with them or their looking will be wholly or partly in vain. Whitman's executors did him a bad service in reprinting ignorant exuberances of this kind

dug out of old newspaper articles. They are little read, probably, but so far as they are read they can only block the way to an appreciation of the great achievements of his genius when it was engaged in its proper work. The time when this wholly uncritical attitude could be excused has now passed away. It is no longer possible to take the view, which he himself and so many of his friends often took, that he was a poet in a new sense of the word and of a different order from all earlier poets. And it is equally impossible, as Americans themselves are increasingly perceiving, to suppose, as Whitman supposed, that the Americans for whom and of whom he wrote were a new order of men who had broken with the past and needed a new sort of literature unconnected with the literature of older countries. All revolutionaries, whether literary, religious or political, begin by this delusion, and after they have made their revolution, learn, if they are capable of learning anything, that it is a delusion. There are no new orders of men. Some generations have a little more of the new in them and a little less of the old. But in all of them the old, by whatever name you call it, inheritance, atavism, custom, prejudice, largely outbalances the new. The method of progress is that of all life. It is change in continuity and continuity in change. There is no life without change; but where there is a breach of continuity there is death.

This is the central truth of history, of which Whitman knew little and so was led to imagine that what he wrote was unlike anything that had ever been written before, and that the generation for whom he wrote it had nothing in common with previous genera-

tions. On the contrary, it grows daily clearer that what will prove most permanent in his work is what was built on the oldest emotions and experiences known to men. Love and death have always been the greatest subjects of poetry, and they remain the greatest in Whitman as they were in Homer. The beauty of Nature and of the body and soul of man were great subjects for the Greeks; and so they are for Whitman. War has always aroused the imagination of poets; and Hector and Andromache are hardly more moving than some of the poems which the great Civil War between his countrymen called out of Whitman. Nor has any poet dwelt more insistently on those two elements in a soldier's death, the sweetness of it and the glory, the *dulce* and the *decorum,* which were joined together long ago by Horace in the most famous of all summings-up of the praise of those who die for their country. The poets and orators of Athens vied with each other in rejoicings over liberty won from foreign enemies or from domestic tyrants. The spirit is the same in Whitman: it is only the circumstances of his time and country which differ. What he did for Lincoln and Lincoln's soldiers stretches hands across the centuries to what Simonides did for the immortal band of Thermopylae, and Pericles for the Athenians who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian war. All these old themes of patriotism and love, the bloom of young faces, the wonder of trees and flowers and of the spring notes of birds, the eternal sighing of the sea, the mystery of death and the mystery of life, Whitman inherited from Greeks and Englishmen, or rather from the whole human race of which every man, and especially every man of genius, is born the heir. But of course there is

more than inheritance. The heir adds to what he receives. He brings himself and his own generation to bear upon the traditional accumulations and experiences of the ages. What Whitman brought is not so much or so new as he thought it was. But it is something, and it is new. New York as he saw it, the whole American world as he experienced it, was something that had never been before. So far as he could embrace it, and so far as he could transfuse it into poetry, he added to the poetic inheritance of mankind. His embrace was prodigious: there is a prodigality both of observation and of interest in some of his poems of which it is not too much to say that it sometimes recalls Shakespeare. As with Shakespeare so sometimes with him: it seems that there is no man on the earth, and no doing or making or business of any kind going on upon it, that he has not observed and remembered. No doubt he is much less successful than Shakespeare in converting all his base metal into gold. It was one of his curious ignorances that he thought that all it needed for becoming gold was to be called so. He only occasionally understood that if the poet is not an alchemist he is nothing at all. Happily for him he practised alchemy more often than he knew. But there are wildernesses of catalogue in his work in which his material is left as unshaped and even untouched as if the writer were a surveyor's clerk or a compiler of statistics for a county council. Like Wordsworth, who anticipated him in so many ways, he was unaware that poetry cannot be made of any subject or written in any language. But he had none of the self-protecting instinct which kept Wordsworth from acting very often on his ignorance. He could not be much more

indifferent than Wordsworth was to the critical opinion of his time and country. But it is one thing to be indifferent to authoritative opinion and another to be unaware that such opinion exists; it is one thing to have Coleridge for your intimate friend and quite another to have as your friends half-educated writers in the American provincial newspapers of sixty or seventy years ago.

These were the difficulties with which Whitman's path to poetry was beset, though he was almost entirely unaware of them. By native genius he got through them, but they left their mark upon him. The triviality of so much of his work, its constant exhibition of that mixture of grandiosity and banality which is everywhere the note of "democratic" literature, his refusal to submit himself to those limitations of words which are the strength as well as the limitation of a poet, all these things and others, results alike of his temperament and his environment, stood continually in the way of his perfect achievement and stand still in the way of his complete recognition. The object of this little book is to make one more effort, which will certainly not be the last that will have to be made, to clear away these obstacles, not by denying them, which is impossible, and if it were possible would be absurd, but by giving them and their unfortunate consequences the frankest admission. So and so only, as it seems to me, shall we arrive at a clear view of what remains after all deductions, not merely the originality, not merely the genius, but the actual poetic achievement of Whitman.

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF WHITMAN

The work of a poet, like the work of any other man, is partly conditioned by the circumstances of his life. It is conceivable, though not very probable, that Shakespeare might never have discovered his dramatic genius if he had not had to make his living and had not tried to make it as an actor. If he had been a man of independent means he might never have thought of exposing himself to the intrigues and jealousies for which theatres have always been conspicuous; and his genius might have satisfied itself with poems, greater no doubt than *Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis* but of the same order as they. Necessity sent him to the theatre and ultimately made him the creator of Hamlet and Lear; necessity, and with it that curious instinct which, though often defeated, always tries to set a man to the doing of his proper business. The nature and form of Milton's achievement was decided by three things outside his own character and genius. The easy circumstances of his father, and the father's unbounded confidence in his son, gave the young poet the longest and most scholarly education poet ever had: an education which would have overwhelmed a smaller man but only increased the strength of the giant. Then there

was the Civil War and the prominent part he himself played in the Revolution which followed it. And then there was the defeat, the poverty, and above all, the blindness of his old age.

So with Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* is the child not merely of genius but of genius shaped by poverty, ignorance and adventure; above all by the America of the forties and fifties of the last century and by the Civil War of its sixties. If Walt Whitman had been to school and college he would no doubt have been less often absurd; but is it certain that he would ever have been a poet? Perhaps we may exaggerate the loss that great men would have suffered if the circumstances which served them so well had not been theirs; for we can never set limits to the power which genius has so often shown of shaping and transforming circumstance. Shelley triumphantly defeated his father and Eton and Oxford and Harriet; Blake and Clare defeated poverty. But this we can say. As Wordsworth could not possibly have been the particular thing he was if he had not been born among the Lakes, so Whitman could not possibly have been the poet of *Leaves of Grass* if he had not come of workman parentage, if he had not from a very early age had to shift for himself, and if he had not had that American world of seemingly boundless possibilities to do it in. Besides, there was the war. He and Milton both hated war and despised its poets. But each in truth owed the highest heights he climbed to the experience he had had of the heroism and the agony of a great national struggle. The war was the central fact in Whitman's life and, as he said himself, though he had "made a start" before it, without the passion it aroused in him

all his work and aims might well have "come to nought".

His life divides itself naturally into three periods. The first, from 1819 to 1848, is that of youth feeling its way. The second, from 1848 to 1873, is the great period both of life and of poetry. The third, from 1873 to 1892, is, in the main, one of weakness and decay slowly passing into death.

He was born in 1819 at a place called West Hills on Long Island, on a farm which had belonged to his family for more than a hundred and fifty years. According to the photograph of it given in Mr. Binns's *Life of Whitman* it is a small but substantial house, much like thousands of farmhouses to be seen here in England. It is no longer the property of the Whitman family. Nor did Whitman himself spend much time in it. His father left it and moved to the neighbouring town of Brooklyn in 1823 before the boy was four years old. But the children, and especially Walt, spent long summer days in the fields round the old home; and it is this rather than his actual birth in it that gives West Hills its importance in his life. It secured for the poet of a very modern, urban and constantly changing civilisation, the experience in his earliest years of trees and flowers and birds and, what struck deepest of all into his inner life of the imagination, of the mysterious call of the sea.

He came of good stock. Late in life he could say: "As to loving and disinterested parents no boy or man ever had more cause to bless and thank them than I." In his earlier years he thought his "heredity stamp" came mainly from his mother's side, but later on he got to see that there was a good deal of his father in

him; notably, no doubt, his quietness and caution. His mother was the daughter of a Dutch father and of an English or Welsh mother of Quaker traditions. She was not a Friend in the denominational sense, but the Quakerism in her blood, and the fact that the most impressive religious experience of Whitman's boyhood was connected with the preaching of an unorthodox Quaker called Hicks, may have had something to do with the vein of mysticism which is so marked a feature of many of his poems. The poet's father, after whom he was named Walter, was more of a carpenter than a farmer and practised that trade when he moved from West Hills to the then small town of Brooklyn. There the boy lived by the waterside; but one may suppose that while the town and the wharf first gave him that sense, always so marked in him, of the interestingness of man's various usings of his conquest of land and sea, the frequent escapes to the old home and the hills, from which the sea was only a distant sight or a mysterious music, fostered in him that other, more ordinarily poetic, consciousness which felt in nature the presence of a friend, a mother, or a god.

Many years afterwards, in the first of the poems called *Sea-Drift,* he recalls how, as a boy, he would leave his bed and wander "alone, bareheaded, barefoot"; and how once,

> When the lilac scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was growing,

he found a nest with four eggs in it and how he every day watched "the he-bird" and "the she-bird" till one day the hen disappeared:

> And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,
> And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,

Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,
I saw, I heard, at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,
The solitary guest from Alabama.

Then follows the song of the bird:

Blow! blow! blow!
Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;
I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.

. . . . . .

Soothe! soothe! soothe!
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,
But my love soothes not me, not me.

Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.

O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.

O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?
What is that little black thing I see there in the white?

Loud! loud! loud!
Loud I call to you, my love!

. . . . . .

O darkness! O in vain!
O I am very sick and sorrowful.

O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.

As the bird sings the boy becomes aware that he too is a singer, a poet, and then he is filled with sorrow and

love and their difficult questionings; and at last the sea gives him the oldest of answers, the answer to which all have to submit, which he more than most poets learned not merely to endure but to welcome and embrace.

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

This may be partly to anticipate; for a man's memory easily reads his mature self into his childhood. There is more in the poem, of course, than there was in the experience; there always is in all good poems. But it points unmistakably back to a boy who began very early to feel the mystery of life and death and the companionship of land and sea. One other point about Whitman's inheritance or environment and we may pass to the life which he began very early to make for himself. He came of "rebel" stock, and would of course in no way have objected to that word. Both his paternal and maternal ancestors seem to have served in Washington's armies, and one at least of his kin was captured and imprisoned by the British military authorities. So the infant Walt had freedom in his blood as well as in the air of his time and country. Possibly too the odd fact that when he was five or six he was kissed by the hero Lafayette, then in America, may have added to his ardour for liberty, of which

Lafayette was regarded as the prophet. Add to this that he was brought up with no Puritan strictness and early in his life became a devourer of novels, especially of Walter Scott's and Cooper's, and we have a childhood anything but unfavourable to the development of a poet.

But his childhood came early to an end. By the time he was eleven he was errand boy or clerk to a lawyer, and two years later he had begun his long connection with journalism and was boarding with the printer of a local paper. He was even allowed to write occasionally, but the chief thing remembered about him was the idleness which made his proprietor say that if he caught an ague he would be too lazy to shake.

Then, in 1836, there was a brief phase of journalism in New York; but he soon returned to his native Long Island, where he spent four or five years as a teacher with at least one interval during which he ran a newspaper of his own. Reminiscences of him at this time speak of the force and charm of his personality as already conspicuous. He is said to have liked amusement, especially whist, but worked furiously when he did work. He neither drank nor swore nor smoked, owing probably to a passing phase of Puritanism not uncommon in youth. The same temperament showed itself in the first success of his pen, his tale called *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*. This was issued as a supplement by a New York newspaper a year after his return to that city and to journalism in 1841. When twenty thousand copies are sold of a book written by a man of twenty-two he is not likely to take to any other trade but writing. And for the rest of his life, though Whitman occasionally took up other ostensible occupa-

tions, such as carpentering with his father, or working at a clerk's desk, his chief business outside that of being himself was writing of one kind or another. In after years he laughed at his temperance tract and liked asserting that he wrote it in a beer cellar with the help of Bacchus or John Barleycorn. All this time he was something of a Radical or Democratic politician, and, though he also wrote in "Whig" papers, he did some purely party work for Polk, the Democratic President elected in 1844. He occasionally came across notable men such as Poe and Bryant, but it was not such influences which did the shaping of him then or at any other time. What made him the man and the poet he became was no following of any hero or master, but his own peculiar genius which enabled him to observe, absorb and even love all sorts and conditions of things and people, human, animal and vegetable, in that hurrying and already crowded life of New York and its neighbourhood. And not merely to absorb. There was in his genius resistance as well as adaptability, and in spite of his universal interests and sympathies he remained an individualist, a heretic, a rebel; in a word, himself. This period of active journalism came to an end in 1848, and it was a political issue, the great issue, then beginning to divide men, which concluded it. Whitman had been for two years editor of a Democratic paper (in which, one is glad to hear, he so far relaxed his severity as to "approve of dancing within reasonable hours") when the slave issue entered upon a new phase through many Democrats going back upon the policy of the Wilmot proviso which excluded slavery from new States. Among these were Whitman's proprietors, and when they criticised his anti-slavery leading articles

he at once resigned. Slavery was presently to make a great war, and the war was to make Whitman such a poet and indeed such a man as he would certainly never have been without it. But he was never, or only for a very short time, an extreme abolitionist. In later life, as Mr. Traubel reports, he would say that friends of his had "thought slavery the one crying sin of the universe", and would comment: "I didn't; though I too thought it a crying sin, I never could quite lose the sense of other evils in this evil." And on another occasion he said of the war: "The negro was not the thing; the chief thing was to stick together." That was also the view of his hero Lincoln. Perhaps this attitude in Whitman came partly of his dislike and contempt for the religious fanatics who were conspicuous among the abolitionists, and partly from that strong element of caution which he declared the phrenologists were quite right in discovering in him. It is an element conspicuously absent from his poetry, but that it was in him may be seen from many sayings in his recorded conversations and from the tone of his political prose, so much more guarded than that of his political verse. But Whitman's reserves, so far as he had them, on the slavery issue were entirely political and prudential. On the human and personal side he made no qualifications at all, in his life any more than in his poetry; always treating negroes with all other social and even moral outcasts as his equals, and indeed the equals of the President in the White House. No political doubts, then, alter the fact that the slave issue was the dominant issue of Whitman's life. It gave him the only great and public opportunity he had of bringing his gospel of democracy, equality and the

"divine average" to the test. And the opportunity made him, as opportunities do make men when men do not refuse them. It may have been, indeed it was, the issue of the Union which brought both Lincoln and Whitman to Washington, each to do his own work there. And the maintenance of the Union, not the abolition of the doomed institution of slavery, was the important result of the war. But the importance of political issues is dimly perceived and lukewarmly felt by the ordinary man. The question of slavery, on the other hand, was not so much political as personal, human, moral and religious. It is issues of that sort which burn themselves into men's hearts and memories; and Lincoln will always be remembered as the Commander-in-Chief, and Whitman as the poet, of the war which killed slavery. Without it neither might ever have attained to heroic stature at all. So it is fitting enough that Whitman's break with his early life should have been forced upon him by the very issue which was to prove the greatness of his manhood and his genius.

It was in January 1848 that he resigned his editorship of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* and almost immediately afterwards he left the world and neighbourhood in which he had been brought up, having accepted an engagement on a newspaper at New Orleans. On his way south he wrote some verses showing a northerner's fears of the "voluptuous languor", sunshine and sweetness, of the South. The fears did not prove unfounded. He stayed at New Orleans only a few months, but during that time he appears to have had an experience which affected his whole life. What exactly it was is unknown or obscure; but it seems certain that he

"formed an intimate relationship", as Mr. Binns says, "with some woman of higher social rank than his own", and that she became the mother of a child who was his, and perhaps of others later on. There was no marriage: and the extreme reticence of Whitman, the least reticent of men, on the whole subject suggests that it was in her interest, or at her desire, or owing to the pressure of her family, that there was no marriage, and that the whole story was kept so secret. Near the end of his life he wrote a letter to John Addington Symonds about it and mentioned a grandson with whom he was in frequent communication. He says in this letter that he had had six children: and Traubel says that in his later years he made frequent allusions to his fatherhood. He wished to dictate a statement on the subject and to have it put away in a safe, "in order that", as he said, "some one should authoritatively have all the facts at command if by some misfortune a public discussion of the incident were ever provoked". He did not wish the matter broached, and felt, says Traubel, "that it would indisputably do a great injury to some one, God knows who (I do not)". When his grandson came to visit him in his last illness Traubel regretted that he had not been there and met the young man: "God forbid," said Whitman. Evidently there was some mystery which will probably never be penetrated now. It is remarkable that no one seems ever to have claimed to be his son or grandson, even after his death and established American and European fame. However, what is important is that during this stay at New Orleans in 1848 he had an experience of passionate love; that this ended quickly in "an enforced separation" which, he told Traubel, was "the tragedy of his life"; that it

was found after his death that he had destroyed all references to this New Orleans visit in his papers and books of memoranda, several leaves being torn out of one such book after the entry recording his start on that journey; that perhaps by reason of this affair, he never married, and when asked why he never did would say either that he had always avoided entanglements which threatened his freedom, or that it was impossible to give a satisfactory explanation of his reasons, though perhaps there was one. The mystery remains. But enough is known to make it clear that this short excursion to New Orleans was a decisive event in his life, and in the life of the poet as well as in the life of the man. For, as Mr. Binns has said, it is significant that it was very soon after he returned from it that he began the *Leaves of Grass*. In love and in sorrow, by an experience at once physical and emotional, he had become aware of his true self. Of a part, at any rate, of his true self. It needed another and far greater experience, also of sorrow and of love, also an adventure of the body as well as of the soul, but now universal as well as individual and entirely free from selfishness and self-indulgence, to reveal first to himself and then to any who would read his words the whole of what he had it in him to be.

By the time Whitman got back to Brooklyn he had been four months away. In addition to his emotional experience he had gained experience of another kind, which was to prove important. Much more stay-at-home by nature than most of his countrymen, he might never have left his native State before the war but for this excursion to New Orleans. He did not come straight home, but went up to Illinois and round to

New York by way of Chicago and the Great Lakes. In Wisconsin he saw the "pioneers" who were to provide a title or first line to one of his best-known poems. Altogether he brought back with him a far wider knowledge of what he liked calling "these States", and, through them, both of Nature and of men than he could have had if he had stayed at his desk in Brooklyn. If there were any truth in the statements he sometimes made in his later years about his having "lived quite a good deal in the South" and "partly lived" in most of the Western States, these experiences must belong to the period between the New Orleans visit and the war. But there is no other evidence for them and it is not easy to find room for them. Anyhow, on his return from New Orleans after a brief and unsuccessful attempt at printing and publishing a newspaper of his own, he joined his father in the carpentering and building business, remaining apparently quite indifferent to the excitement which was then hurrying thousands of young men to look for gold or follow other ways of fortune-seeking in the new West. Poets have two great needs, experience and peace. There is often a struggle in them between the instinct of action and adventure which provides their material, and the instinct of solitude and meditation which uses it. In Whitman, as in most poets, though both were strong, the second was the stronger of the two. He liked the poets of action better than the poets of meditation: but for himself he was as fond of brooding idleness as Wordsworth. In his earlier years, when he lived and worked with a newspaper man, his idleness and fondness for his own thoughts and ways produced such an impression that he was chiefly

remembered for his inconsiderateness in the home and for spending hours lying out in the garden when he ought to have been at work. So while he was working with his father as a builder his own inner life was not put aside. It was noticed that he went his own way, was not inclined to be bound by family hours or arrangements, always had a book about him for his dinner companion, would slip off to Coney Island to bathe and read, and when a job was finished would go away for weeks to the solitary parts of Long Island. All through his life he did a good deal of reading, and, for all his tendency to scoff at classics, got a good deal of pleasure and profit out of them. Indeed he sometimes bore the strongest testimony to their greatness. Of course he read Greek only in translations, but he preferred the Greeks to Shakespeare as less "feudal", and in particular had a great love of Homer whom he would not let his friend Bucke disparage. "No," he said, "don't make light of the *Iliad*." The Bible was frequently in his hands and so was the great Stoic Epictetus. He was a great reader of Tennyson, and still more, from the beginning to the end of his life, of Walter Scott, of whom he once rather strangely said, "If you could reduce the *Leaves* to their elements you would see Scott unmistakably active at the roots." He told Traubel he had read the *Heart of Midlothian* a dozen times or more. No doubt it was in his boyhood, and during these years before the war, that he laid the foundations of a good deal of his miscellaneous knowledge. His evenings he frequently spent in New York and often at the Opera, for which he had a kind of passion. The family prospered, and Walt with the rest, but he grew continually less interested in his

ostensible work, and more and more absorbed in the other work of which those about him knew little and thought less. So in 1855, though the road to something like riches seemed plain before him, he gave up carpentering. Possibly his father's illness and death, which occurred in the same year, may have had something to do with his decision. But a more important event, which occurred while his father was still alive, was no doubt the decisive consideration. In July 1855 appeared the first edition of *Leaves of Grass.* As soon as it was out he gave himself some months of solitude by the sea.

His meditations there must have been of a conflicting character. On the one hand, the thing which he had so long felt he had it in him to do was now done, or at least begun. The tremendous *Song of Myself,* crude with the crudity of illiterate ignorance but universal almost as life, had been offered to the American people of whose unuttered and secret soul Whitman regarded it as the escaping, defiant, triumphant voice. Nothing could undo for the poet the joy of that. When a man has a thing to say in which he believes with all his soul nothing can take away the happiness of having said it. No opposition, no failure can rob him of that possession unless they conquer his faith in himself and his message. So long as he himself believes, the disbelief, even the contempt, of all the world, much as it takes from him, cannot take that. So these lonely weeks by the sea which he loved must have had a peace and joy which he had long waited for and then for the first time knew. But there was another side, there must have been, to his thoughts. He had expected opposition. He knew beforehand that his arrogant novelties would annoy

Boston: indeed he always wished to annoy Boston and all academic, traditional, and classical persons all over the world. And so to some extent he did, in this first edition of his *Leaves*. The *Boston Intelligence* ascribed the book to an escaped lunatic. But what was more remarkable was that some of the most cultivated of the newspapers and reviews received it with toleration if not with respect. That may have pleasantly surprised him. What surprised him very unpleasantly was the total indifference of the public, especially of the great unlettered public for whose applause he had hoped. Then as ever since it is exactly the class which he despised, the learned, literary, academic class among whom he has found his admirers. The class which he loved and glorified, his own world of the uneducated, then as ever since, has thought of him, so far as it has thought of him at all, sometimes as profane, sometimes as obscene, always as absurd. The class that he understood has never understood him. The class which he never understood has, in a good many instances, vindicated the value of the culture he despised, by showing that by that very culture it has been enabled to perceive what has rarely been perceived by the class to whom he specially addressed himself, the essential poetry which lay in his work so often concealed under a surface of absurdity or vulgarity. This has been conspicuous all along, and was so from the very beginning. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had none of the popular success for which its author confidently looked. He thought the people would find in it the very expression of themselves, the thing for which they had long been waiting. The people made no signs at all, or only of contempt. But Boston, or what

was nearest to Boston, produced the very welcome he had hoped for. It was the very prophet of the literary class who stood forth to say the decisive word in his favour. Emerson came across the book and wrote at once the most generous of letters to its unknown author.

"I am not blind," he began, "to the worth of the wonderful gift of the *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. . . . I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

And, a little later, one who called upon the Sage at Concord was sent on to Whitman at Brooklyn, because the day of the long-attended wonder had at last arrived: "Americans abroad may now come home: unto us a man is born."

That brave letter remains to-day the best summing up of the praise of Whitman. It was not the occasion for the qualifications of criticism: they could wait till the work had been finished and the praise overdone. It was the moment for the right hand of friendship, the moment for accepted fame to exercise that finest of its privileges which it so often refuses, the privilege of discerning and proclaiming, in young obscurity, a fame destined to exceed its own. When in all literary history has it been more royally exercised than on this occasion by Emerson? How many happy readings Whitman must have given to this letter in his solitary weeks by the Long Island coast! No one can say how long, without Emerson, it might have taken for him to get a

hearing at all. Probably Emerson's enthusiasm, which he did not conceal, sold a good many of the thousand copies of that first edition; and the edition of 1856, in which, without his consent, his letter was included as an appendix, owed still more to him. But even with that great help the books brought the poet very little money and "a mere handful of readers". What would they have brought him without Emerson? Not even Emerson could secure for him the vast sales which he anticipated for himself in the foolish letter he added to the second edition. What Emerson could and did give was again the thing Whitman had least expected, or even desired, the interest of the men of letters. Rarely had a first volume brought to a poet the almost immediate personal acquaintance of men so distinguished as those who came before that year was out to visit the artisan author of the *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson's letter was written within a few weeks of the publication and he soon followed it himself. In September he sent Moncure Conway who went with Whitman to visit a prison and was struck, as people always were, with the personal magnetism he could always exercise. Another visitor was Lord Houghton, who shared with Walt a dish of roast apples, the only food which happened to be handy. Thoreau and Alcott come in 1856. Thoreau, who loved solitude more than men and preferred the woods to the streets, was not altogether made to appreciate Whitman. But he called him a "great fellow", and when he described the *Leaves* as a mixture of the *Bhagavat-Gita* and the *New York Herald*, he meant sympathy as well as repulsion. To Alcott Whitman appeared "the very god Pan". A poet who at once obtained such recognition from such men had in fact

very exceptional good fortune: and it was to Emerson that he mainly owed it.

The six years which elapsed between the first appearance of *Leaves of Grass* and the outbreak of the war were partly spent by Whitman in producing the second and third editions and in planning to use, as a lecturer preaching his own gospel, the experience in speaking which he had gained in earlier years as an orator at Democratic meetings. In this as in other matters he had unbounded confidence in himself. He intended his speeches to be, both in manner and in matter, as unlike those of the ordinary popular speakers as his poems were unlike those of the ordinary popular poets. With his voice as with his pen he wanted to preach his new religion of democracy, equality, and the average man. He also hoped to make a living by his lectures, but that was, as always with him, a secondary consideration. The plan, however, came to nothing. He was never destined for the triumphs or rewards of the orator. Even in his old age, when he had a certain established fame, his wish to give an annual lecture on the day of Lincoln's death met with no success: he could get "neither engagements nor audiences nor public interest". His book was to be, and he gradually came to see it was, his only means of saying what he wanted to say. Meanwhile he was still actively accumulating material for it. The ever-growing life of New York was all around him and he loved to bathe in it, be absorbed in it and swept about in all directions by it, with something of the same ecstasy of abandonment which he felt, all his life, when bathing in the sea. His easy gift for making acquaintances helped him to know all sorts of people in all the varied and separate

worlds of the great city. He knew literary men and journalists, of course; singers and musicians, as was natural to one so fond of music; politicians, too, one of whom he had at one time looked like being. But he had a special predilection for mechanics, artisans, pilots of boats and drivers of coaches, and entered into their lives as one of themselves. He was their companion at their work and would do it for them sometimes. He is said once to have driven a coach a whole winter for a man who was ill. He would talk to them of politics, literature and music, and would lend them books. One of his boatmen friends reports: "I have seen a youth swabbing a deck with Walt's Homer in his monkey-jacket pocket." In those days accidents were already beginning to be frequent in the New York streets; Walt's friends were sometimes their victims; perhaps it was in visiting them in the hospitals that he became fully aware of that power of sympathy, able almost to recall the dead to life, which he was to put to such heroic use a few years later at Washington. Part of the greatness of poets lies in the fact that experiences which are to other men ordinary are to them extraordinary. Of no one was that truer than of Whitman. He found in everything interest and significance; in nearly everything matter for wonder and love. And a poet is never more alive than when he has just written his first book and knows he is a poet as he could not know before. Whitman had not won the popularity he expected, but he had received such praise as could reasonably assure him that his faith in himself was not wholly a dream of vanity. He now knew that he had poetry in him and more than had yet come out. He was, during these years, one may be quite sure, seeing

poems every day, in every street, in every face; even in the faces of those from whom most men shrink in fear or hatred or contempt—the criminal, the outcast, the children of vice and infamy. It is easy and common to lash that shrinking with scorn and indignation; but in truth the conduct of the shrinkers is neither unnatural nor in itself unjust, for the thing shrunk from is commonly hateful or contemptible. Only what is hateful, which is not the whole in any human being, blinds ordinary eyes to all the rest, so that it calls for the genius of saint or poet to discover in that sea of wretchedness some island on which love can set its foot.

The result of all this was the much enlarged third edition of the *Leaves* which a firm of Boston publishers produced in 1860. He himself went there to superintend the work and revise the proofs. There he saw much of Emerson. The seer of Concord had suffered from the indignation aroused by some things in the book for which he had, as it were, stood sponsor, and he now tried hard to persuade Whitman to omit the offending poems. No doubt Emerson urged that they would attract the wrong readers and repel many of the right. But Whitman refused. He was at no time and in no matters a very teachable man; and conventional respectability was of all voices the least likely to be successful in summoning him to surrender. That element of caution which, he said, played such a large part in his character and life played no part at all in matters of this sort. So that when Emerson put these prudential considerations before him and asked what he had to say to them, his reply was that he could not answer Emerson's arguments but remained "more

settled than ever to adhere to my own theory and exemplify it"; to which the most amiable of recorded prophets replied, "Very well, then: let us go to dinner!"

The third edition of the *Leaves* came out in 1860, and a few thousands of it had been sold before the war sent its publishers into bankruptcy. Its main importance in Whitman's literary history is that the copies which went to England were seed which fell on very good ground. Among the recipients were Bell Scott and Rossetti, and others who had an eye for realities in literature and could discern them behind the most eccentric and unpromising surfaces. The result was that within a few years all the young men, as Symonds said, were "reading and discussing Walt". There was a more important conquest than any of these, though one which, as it turned out, Whitman failed to keep. Not long after the appearance of the 1860 edition George Howard, afterwards ninth Earl of Carlisle, a man of wide culture and many friends among men of art and letters, lent *Leaves of Grass* to the young Swinburne who was filled with enthusiasm and sent to America for a copy of his own. He wrote of it to Lord Houghton in August 1862:

> Have you seen the latest edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*? for there is one new poem in it, *A Voice from the Sea*,[1] about two birds on the sea-beach, which I really think is the most lovely and wonderful thing I have read for years and years. I could rhapsodize about it for ten more pages, for there is such beautiful skill and subtle power in every word of it—but I spare you!

But for the present and for some years to come Whitman's main preoccupation was neither his poetry

[1] This is the poem part of which has just been quoted.

nor his fame. The only great event with which he ever came into close contact was upon him. Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860, though he polled considerably fewer votes than the total votes of the other candidates added together. Lincoln was not an abolitionist and was partly chosen because he was not. But his election was treated as a defiance by the South, whose leaders at once issued a manifesto calling for a separate Confederacy of the Slave-holding States. Six States almost immediately seceded. A brief sketch of Whitman's life is not the place to discuss this great issue. There are those who have held that the war was unnecessary, believing that if the seceding States had been left to themselves they would soon have been taught by failure to seek the way of return to the Union. Such an opinion cannot be refuted, for it relies upon a hypothesis which never became a fact. There is a good deal to be said for it as well as a good deal against. In the view of Lincoln, anyhow, and apparently of Whitman, to admit secession was to be false to the Union. And to them the cause of the Union was one rising above all smaller issues. People who have read any of the legal and constitutional arguments may easily feel that the Southern advocates had the best of them. An impartial arbitrator with the written Constitution before him, and having in view the circumstances in which it was drawn up, would probably have found it impossible to decide that a State had parted with the right to secede. Whitman himself admitted as much in his old age. "The South was technically right and humanly wrong," he said to Traubel in 1888; and perhaps the exact truth about the whole business was never put in fewer words. Anyhow, as we have already

seen, in his eyes it was not the negro that was the important consideration: that was the Union; "the thing was to stick together". On that issue he had no more doubts than Lincoln. Like most of the issues which lead to wars it was one which transcended technical and legal considerations. On those who felt as Lincoln and Whitman felt no constitutional lawyers' arguments could have much effect. Yet when war actually began he was not, like his brother George, an immediate volunteer. Mr. Binns and others have argued in explanation of this that he may well have felt that his books and the propagation of his gospel gave him work to do that had a stronger call on him than fighting could have. I do not believe that this argument is a good one and, what is more important, I do not believe that Whitman would have accepted it. He was not the man to make ingenious excuses for not taking his share of an unpleasant duty. If he deliberately refused to volunteer, his refusal is much more likely to have been caused by Quakerism, a real "conscientious objection", than by any special pleading about the importance of his literary work. When a little later he did find his war work he did not ask himself whether he was "wasting his forces" in running risks, incurring fatigues, and absorbing infections which in fact made his subsequent life one of disease and weakness. And we may be sure that was not the question he asked now. It may perhaps have been that the Quaker tendencies in him had been revived of late by the preaching of one Taylor, a Methodist whose meetings he had attended at Boston the year before. Taylor was not a Friend, but he is said to have reminded Whitman of his early hero, the unorthodox Quaker Elias Hicks; and all this

may have made in the direction of Quakerism, which is not the direction of soldiering. It has been noticed, but may be only a coincidence, that it was only in the 1860 edition of the *Leaves* that he began writing "Third Month", "Fifth Month", and so on, instead of March, May, and the rest. There may also beside Quakerism have been a less creditable motive disinclining Whitman to volunteer. He was at all times, by temperament and by principle, which are so often the same thing under different names, extremely averse to regularity and discipline. He even entertained a foolish notion that discipline, and the subordination which it involves, could be modified or displaced in an army of free Americans. No doubt a few weeks in the army would have taught a man so fundamentally sensible that an army which has not learnt to obey orders without question or hesitation is a useless and dangerous mob. But he would not have liked learning the lesson: a man with such a habit of letting his body loaf when it wanted and his mind give itself up to dreams and visions whenever they came calling, was not likely to relish the notion of life under a sergeant's orders. This reason against volunteering was probably at work in him whether he knew it or not. This, and others; for no doubt the decision was a complex one and the motives mixed, as nearly all human decisions and motives are. Besides, after all, the simplest explanation may be the truest. And that is that Whitman was now forty-two and may well have thought that it was to younger men that the call was addressed. His brother George, who volunteered, was his junior by ten years. In any case, if he stayed at home it was in no merely self-indulgent mood. A

few days after the war began he wrote in a private notebook:

April 16th, 1861. I have this day, this hour resolved to inaugurate for myself a pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded, robust body, by ignoring all drinks but water and pure milk, and all fat meats, late suppers—a great body, a purged, cleansed, spiritualised, invigorated body.

The call to use that body came the next year. In December 1862 George was seriously wounded and Walt at once started to go to him. When he found him George was already well. But Walt had made the second great journey of his life and by far the more important. He never again lived at Brooklyn. For the next ten years Washington was his home, and for the next three or four the war and its consequences absorbed all his energies of body, mind and heart.

The army headquarters was then at Falmouth, and it was there that he found George. But if George had recovered, others whom Walt had known had not, and were being moved to Washington. He went with them, and on arrival at Washington at once began what was to be his constant, even daily, work for the next few years, that of visiting the wounded in the hospitals. He maintained himself by journalism and after a while by a post which was given to him in the Civil Service. But the best of his energy, bodily and spiritual, was given, not to the newspapers or to the Civil Service, but to his voluntary work among the wounded, sick and dying soldiers. His agony at the sights he saw, and at the sense of the horrible waste and misery of war, would sometimes, as so often with generous men who are not personally bearing the hideous burden, make him break out against any policy

which required it; as when he once declared that the whole population of negroes was not worth so terrific a purchase. But more often we may be sure his mood was the mood we find in the poems of these years: one of mingled sympathy and exaltation, seeing death itself not merely as dreadful but also "lovely and soothing", a thing which the body must, indeed, shrink from, but which the spirit may accept and even welcome not only for itself but for others.

Whitman spent ten years in Washington. He went there early in 1863. In January 1873 he had the paralytic stroke which, with his mother's death occurring soon after, brought his life and work at Washington to an end, and sent him to spend elsewhere his remaining nineteen years, a broken man who only enjoyed intervals of health, a martyr also in his turn to the great cause for which he had seen so many young men die. But, dearly as he paid for them, he would never for a moment have said that those years at Washington had not been a thousand times worth while. No writer ever put a higher value on his writings than Whitman. But no writer is ever quite content with writing. He wants to do things as well as to observe them. He wants himself to make matter of poetry or art, not merely to give his own re-creation to what has been made by others and is open to all the world. It is not merely an escape from his own art to another that he wants, the feeling under the influence of which "Rafael made a century of sonnets". It is also that he wants to get away from art to life. Aeschylus at Marathon, Scott the Sheriff and Volunteer, Spenser harrying Irishmen, Johnson selling Thrale's brewery,

it is all the same story: the escape of the author from books to life. Whitman was never a very bookish man, and he had taken his turn of active work at building solid houses in Brooklyn, when, as his brother said, he had his chance and lost it. But that was not the sort of chance he wanted. This was. He took it, lived in it, and died by it. He must have been conscious, indeed he says so more than once in his poems, of his rare gift of personal charm: fascination would not be too strong a word. This gift he now put to use in all its utmost power and abundance for the help of the soldiers in the Washington hospitals. He made himself everything to them, friend, secretary, comforter, nurse. Hospitals were not then organised as they have been since, and surgeons had often to depend on what help they could get for the dressing of wounds and the care of their patients. They must have been happy who got Whitman. He shrank from no risks and was ready for the ugliest work. And he paid the price of his devotion. When he died his doctor stated that it was in the hospitals that he had sown the seeds of the illness which made his later life that of an invalid.

But of course his special work was outside that of doctor and nurse. His miracles—and there is no doubt that he worked them—were miracles of the spirit. Nobody knows beforehand who has and who has not the gift of working miracles of that kind. I have heard of their being worked by another American, an American who died an Englishman, and was in that and all other respects except one a man as unlike Whitman as any in all the world. Henry James was the very type of fastidious culture, an intellectual of the intel-

lectuals, exhibiting always, in speech as in writing, all the hesitations, qualifications, delicate perceptions and distinctions which are the strength and weakness of the critically-trained man. No one could seem more certain to fail utterly in an attempt to talk to the English private soldier. That at any rate was my feeling when in 1915 he told me he meant to visit the wounded in a hospital. Yet I afterwards heard that he had saved a dying man when every one else had failed. The poor man had lost his legs and was sinking merely for lack of the wish to live. Doctor and nurses tried to rouse him and asked those who visited the ward to try: but all equally failed. At last the nurse told Henry James the story and took him to the bedside. What he had said she did not know. But it somehow brought the needed courage and hope. Or, more probably, it was not exactly what was said, either in his case or in Whitman's. Utterly unlike as they were, the two men had, each in his kind, a rarity about them which was genius; and genius is the intensest form of life. That at any rate was what Walt Whitman, strong and healthy, always fresh and clean and cheerful, brought to the poor boys whom he visited. That and the love which set the rest at work. "I believe no men ever loved each other," he wrote to his mother, "as I and some of these poor wounded sick and dying men love each other." As he left at night, he would kiss them, we are told, and they would cry, "Walt, Walt, come again, come again!" Some of them afterwards remembered him as "a man with the face of an angel". He would bring them flowers and tobacco and money, out of his own scanty store at first, and, later, also out of funds entrusted to him through the influence of

Emerson and others. He would recite verses to them (not his own, it seems), write their letters and lend them newspapers. All these services were familiar tales to us between 1914 and 1918; hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men and women rendered them all over England. But they were not so familiar sixty years ago: and here as elsewhere the Walt of the hospitals was a pioneer. Above all, our English thousands of ordinary men and women could not bring the best thing Whitman brought, which was of course himself. He used to say in later life that the "supreme loves of his life had been for his mother and for the wounded". No wonder he worked miracles. They were the miracles not only of genius but of love. This was by far the greatest episode in his life, and naturally enough it produced the greatest poetry. It is noticeable that his blatancies, vulgarities, and insolent oddities of language always tend to disappear in proportion as he is moved by what he is writing about. In the best of the war poems they disappear altogether; particularly when, as often happened, he was outside the town, in the open field, under the sun or stars, fetching in the newly wounded from the camps that were such a little way off the Federal Capital. Then under the double emotion of nature and man, the mystery of space and the mystery of love, he would write poems of such simplicity and beauty as sometimes recall the Greek Anthology. A Greek would perhaps have avoided the unsparing realism of the epithets of the second line in this little poem: but except for that, is there anything in English with more of the quiet satisfying completeness of those short poems which the Greeks called Epigrams?

Look down fair moon, and bathe this scene,
Pour softly down night's nimbus floods on faces ghastly, swollen, purple,
On the dead on their backs with arms toss'd wide,
Pour down your unstinted nimbus sacred moon.

Will any one think it going too far to name the great name of Simonides in connection with these four lines? Different from what we have of his they are, of course, especially in the less assured choice and handling of words; but are they not like too, with something of the same greatness of brevity, simplicity and reserve?

But Whitman had, perforce, to live a life of his own all this time as well as that he lived for the soldiers. The money, regretted by his brother George, which he might easily have made in the building boom at Brooklyn a few years before, would now have been very useful. As it was he was very poor. The journalism he did, and some copying work he got in the paymaster's office, brought in very little: some of his relations were in difficulties: and, above all, he insisted on finding money for the comforts he wanted for his wounded "boys". He was no merely indiscriminate giver, but what could help without harming them he meant his boys should have: and they had it out of his own purse, or the purses that supplied his. That often meant very severe self-sacrifice on his part. Indeed we are told that later on, when he got a small post in the Indian Office with a salary of sixteen hundred dollars, he only spent a quarter of it on himself, saving one third, and spending the rest on his family who were often in distress, and on the poor, whether soldiers or others. He lived in the extremest simplicity: first boarding in the family of William Douglas O'Connor, soon to be his eloquent champion and then

for a time almost his enemy when differences arose because Whitman was not and would not be of the extreme abolitionist party. O'Connor had been a journalist and was now an official. His house was the centre of a circle of interesting men, and, though Whitman soon moved to a little room of his own, access to the O'Connor group must have been a great resource and pleasure to him. His health was generally magnificent as yet: and he was the last man to throw good health recklessly away. He wanted all he had and kept all he could, for the soldiers' sake as well as for his own. It was his moral and physical well-being that was, as he knew, so useful in the hospitals. And he deliberately took care of it. "My habit, when practicable," he says, "was to prepare for starting out on one of those daily or nightly tours of from a couple to four or five hours" (in the wards) "by fortifying myself with previous rest, the bath, clean clothes, a good meal, and as cheerful an appearance as possible." So he would take long midnight rambles as a refreshment after the close air of the wards. But the strain was gradually telling on him, and no doubt the poison begining to do its work. He had a serious illness in the summer of 1864 and had to go home to his mother for six months. There, so far as his health allowed, he kept to his Washington work, visiting the hospitals of Brooklyn and New York. By December he was back at Washington, where, soon after, he obtained a clerkship in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior. But he did not hold this long. Somebody called the attention of his official chief, the Secretary of the Interior, one Harlan, to the fact that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Mr. Harlan was a strict

Methodist: and the result of a perusal of a copy of that work which Whitman had in his desk and was using in the preparation of a new edition was a note that "the service of Walter Whitman will be dispensed with from and after this date". The dismissal did him no particular harm, as O'Connor persuaded the Attorney-General to transfer him to his own department. Moreover, it led O'Connor to write *The Good Gray Poet,* an impassioned panegyric of Whitman, and so, no doubt, indirectly brought the *Leaves* a few new readers. In any case the sins of the *Leaves* which no one knew could not greatly hurt its author whom every one knew and liked, at any rate in Washington.

Meanwhile the war came to an end, but Whitman, never an easy mover, stayed on at Washington. His work there, if dull and unimportant, was easy enough and gave him a good deal of leisure as well as a salary of three hundred pounds. The leisure was largely spent in working at the new edition of the *Leaves* which appeared in October 1867. This settled, he turned to the most important of his Prose Works, *Democratic Vistas,* which appeared in 1871. This is, as we shall see in more detail later, one of the best statements in existence of the democratic equalitarian point of view in politics and life. It is curious, or perhaps not curious, that it is far saner than his poems on the same subject, being, indeed, full of all sorts of doubts, fears, qualifications and criticisms. Probably his experiences at Washington, where he had seen official democracy at work; his experiences in the hospitals, where he had seen attendants steal the money of dying soldiers, and had written of such things that when he saw them he got "almost frightened with the world": and, perhaps

most of all, his profound disgust at the results of "equality" as seen in negro political dominance in Washington elections and negroes parading the city in arms "like so many wild brutes let loose", had forced him to realise, as he had not realised in his early poems, that the concrete reality of democracy seldom corresponds with the vision of it seen by its prophets. Not that his faith in democracy failed then or at any other time; only that he had learnt that no more in democracy than elsewhere is the way of perfection either swift or easy or generally followed. That is no doubt why he lays such great stress in *Democratic Vistas* on ethics as the greatest thing in life, and on conscience, a living sense of the difference between right and wrong, as one of the greatest of human needs. It must have been part of what he was thinking of when he once praised the "zeal and moral energy" of Whittier, which he "must not, dare not" call "wilfulness and narrowness", "though doubtless the world needs now, and always will need, almost above all, just such narrowness and wilfulness". For Whitman morality was of the essence of democracy which, as he saw it, is no mere political or economic experiment: it is itself a religion and a life. Of that kind of faith Walt Whitman never ceased from the first to the last to be the prophet. Only it was with this faith of his as with others of other people. Faith shapes life. For it is spirit and that is the very business of spirit. But it is also shaped by life. For spirit must work through living men who are body as well as spirit and without embodiment faith becomes a vision or a dream. But in embodiment it learns the limits of its possibilities. The more Whitman and other prophets see of the

working embodiment of their faith the more they perceive that their profoundest moments cannot be moments of easy complacence.

In 1871 he brought out another edition, the fifth, of the *Leaves*. This included *Drum-Taps* but not as yet the poems inspired by the death of Lincoln. They were printed, at present, in a separate volume called *Passage to India,* which for Whitman is symbolic of the journey of the soul discovering that all the seas and lands are part of one whole and that Divine. Death was the dominant thought of these poems: and death, from this time forward, began to be an ever nearer and nearer presence through the twenty years Whitman had yet to live. In January 1873 he had a paralytic stroke from which he never completely recovered. He did, after a few weeks, struggle back to his office, but his mother was taken ill in May at Camden near Philadelphia, where she now lived with his brother George, and he only got to her in time to see her die. It was the supreme sorrow of his life, and he stayed on with George at Camden, a broken, lonely, and, it seems, for the time, a despairing man. He could hardly use his limbs to get about: his brain was too weak to work; and his heart was weighed down by the agony of his loss. "I cannot be reconciled to that yet," he wrote to his young friend Pete Doyle; "it is the great cloud of my life; nothing that ever happened before has had such an effect on me." These were perhaps the worst years he ever knew. After eighteen months' absence from his post, during which he had been allowed to employ a substitute, he was in 1874 dismissed from the Government Service, and poverty was added to illness and sorrow. If he did not wish for death his

thoughts often turned in that direction, and not rebelliously or even reluctantly. But the coming of death was still nearly twenty years away from him, and he was to have good days again though never again vigour or even health. Meanwhile George Whitman took him into his new house, also at Camden, and there he stayed more than ten years till, in 1884, wishing to be alone, he bought the small cottage close by, in which at last he died. These final years are, of course, the least eventful of his life. There was a gradual and partial recovery of his health. He was able from time to time to write poems: the *Prayer of Columbus* and the *Song of the Redwood Tree,* and the *Song of the Universal,* in 1874 or 1875; all, it may be noticed, full of the thought of death. The Centennial Edition of the *Leaves* came out in 1876. In the same year appeared *Two Rivulets,* which included *Passage to India* and some new pieces both of prose and verse. A later edition was assailed by the Boston District Attorney soon after it appeared, and therefore abandoned by the publishers. However, between the copies which were sold before the attack and those afterwards sold by the Philadelphia firm to whom the book was transferred, Whitman is said to have made nearly £300 out of royalties that year. In 1882 he issued the final edition of the *Leaves,* now separated from the prose; at the same time he published the prose volume, *Specimen Days.* In 1888 he had another paralytic attack, and lay for some days apparently dying. But he once more partially recovered, and before the year was out was able to enjoy the publication of *November Boughs,* which again included both prose and verse. This was the last volume but one, the last of all being *Good-bye,*

my Fancy, which appeared late in 1891, a few months before his death. All the poems are now incorporated in *Leaves of Grass.*

It was not much, all told, for the production of nearly twenty years. But that was the price he paid for the work in the hospitals to which he had almost deliberately sacrificed his health. From such a broken man not much more creative work could be expected. The final years had to be mainly years of reaping not of sowing. There was not much money to reap but there was now something better, the devotion of disciples and friends, the tributes of honour and admiration from many men and women, American and English, whose allegiance was fame. The enjoyment of that allegiance was almost the principal business of the last phase of his life. He more and more lived surrounded by people who told him that he and the *Leaves* had made a new epoch in the history of literature, and indeed of the human mind. And he had neither the temperament nor the breadth of knowledge needed to resist this sort of flattery. There were indeed moments when he had doubts. One writer of reminiscences records him as expressing serious uncertainty as to the judgement of posterity. But more often his mood was one of very willing acceptance of the offered homage; and we are told that his complacent egotism about the *Leaves* sometimes irritated even those very elect who were more to blame for it than he. But, extravagances apart, he had solid grounds of self-congratulation. What is remarkable about him all through is not the opposition his works aroused but the recognition they received. We have seen Emerson's instant tribute to his first volume: "unto us a man is born";

the very praise which he desired, confirming the claim that in him America had at last become herself and found her own voice. And though Emerson never himself printed one word of praise of Whitman, and put no poem of Whitman's into his *Parnassus,* yet that prompt recognition was worth much more to the unknown artisan poet than all the praise he received in later years. Still that praise was remarkable and came from remarkable men. He looked upon himself as the preacher of a new religion: so he could not but be gratified when such a man as Thoreau said of his book that it was worth more than all the sermons of the land. And the verdict of Emerson and Thoreau was echoed by some other distinguished Americans. But it was in England, the England of the feudality and culture which he suspected, that he won his most remarkable victories. As his friend Burroughs wrote, it turned out that "virility" and "independence" were "more keenly relished in Britain than in America." And Whitman himself said, in 1888, "the fact remains that the English are still ahead. I have made no gains this side to equal my victories across the sea." He was not satisfied with all his English admirers, complaining, for instance, of Stevenson and Sir Edmund Gosse as introducing qualifications into their praise. But one would have supposed that Stevenson's *"Leaves of Grass* tumbled the world and pride down for me" was praise so exactly to his heart as to have atoned for any number of qualifications. However, he preferred Symonds, who, indeed, proved the most enthusiastic as he was the most surprising of all the English converts. "Symonds," he said, "is a persistent fire: he never quails or lowers his colours." "Who but you,"

great admirer of Tennyson's poetry, which he was fond of reading aloud (he said of *De Profundis* "it sounds to me like organ-playing"), and at his last birthday, when his friends brought with them the champagne of which he was fond, he made them drink first to the memory of Emerson and Longfellow, then to Whittier, and then "to the boss of us all, Tennyson". Tennyson's poems were among the few books he kept near him in the last years: and indeed the two men were in some points as like each other as the two artists were unlike in all. Whitman was not blind to the Tennysonian art: one of his best pieces of criticism is his appreciation of a perfect little letter Tennyson wrote him which he said was finer than a poem and showed that Tennyson was always an artist whatever he wrote. Obviously the letters and good wishes and invitations to England which he received from such a man, the recognised king of English letters, could not but greatly please him: and the whole relation between them, which brought not one insincere word from either, is an honour to both of them. One other proof of English feeling about Whitman ought to be mentioned. In 1876 it became known in England that Whitman was in comparative poverty. Robert Buchanan wrote an article of sympathy and indignation in the *Daily News,* and W. M. Rossetti, who had already done Whitman the signal service of producing the first English selection of the *Leaves,* wrote to the poet to ask what his English friends could do for him. Whitman replied that he was poor but not in want and that the greatest service that English sympathisers could do him was to subscribe for the Centennial Edition of the *Leaves* of which he was himself the publisher. Many

wrote Symonds to him, "are the singer of Love and Faith in their new advent?" And after Whitman's death Symonds, the man of Græco-Roman and Italian culture, all compact of Oxford and art and æsthetics and all that Whitman most distrusted, wrote a study of him in which he deliberately reprinted words which he had contributed in 1889 to a collection of tributes offered to the old poet:

> *Leaves of Grass,* which I first read at the age of twenty-five, influenced me more perhaps than any other book has done, except the Bible; more than Plato, more than Goethe. It is impossible for me to speak critically of what has so deeply entered into the fibre and marrow of my being.

No wonder Whitman declared that Symonds must always be "the first of his English friends". But Symonds by no means stood alone in his generous tribute: other men of letters equally academic in their training and habit used language almost equally strong. Dowden, the student of Shakespeare and biographer of Shelley, was one: and another was York Powell, perhaps the most widely read man of his day, who wrote to Whitman:

> Your *Leaves of Grass* I keep with my Shakespeare and my Bible; and it is from these three I have got more sympathy than from any other books.

But Whitman thought more of poets than of scholars, and he may well have got more pleasure out of Tennyson's verdict that he was "a great big something" than out of these more confident tributes. He could not know how very fine a judge of all poetry Tennyson was and he was not likely to perceive the exact felicity of this apparently vague phrase. But he was a

did so: and Whitman, in his curiously ugly language, says that he found that "both the cash and the emotional cheer" were "deep medicine". Later on a gift of money from England was sent to him and accepted. Whitman was much moved by these practical acts of kindness, which enabled him to take a country holiday. Long after 1876 he said to an American visitor: "I must say that English business stands apart in my thought from all else: for evermore I shall love old England." It ought to be added that friends and relations in America were always ready to help him; that he preferred a very modest way of living; and that he was able when he died to leave more than enough money for the maintenance of his feeble-minded brother Edward.

There is not much else to relate. The quiet years slowly passed in his room and in the open air to which he escaped as often as he could, and were given to silent brooding, reading, and occasional writing. Between 1876 and 1882 he was able to pay visits to a friend at a farm-house ten miles away, where he would spend whole days alone in the woods, often quite naked, enjoying the sunshine, watching all Nature's doings and listening to all her voices. There he was visited by his like-minded English disciple, Edward Carpenter. Once or twice he paid a visit to New York, and in 1879 he was able to spend several weeks on a trip beyond the Mississippi. In 1880 he paid a visit to Canada as the guest of his friend and biographer Dr. Bucke. There he showed all his old eager interest both in Nature and in men: and was equally full of that intensity of life which is the hall-mark of genius, whether he was listening to birds, learning the names

of flowers, reciting Tennyson, or admiring the philanthropic institutions of Canada. And even when he could move no more from Camden he kept the great powers of enjoyment which generally go with unusual vitality. He enjoyed his food, was less abstemious about his drinks, and took occasionally to a glass or two of champagne. American friends provided him with a horse and waggon in which he drove out. After the paralytic attack of 1888 that had to be given up: and then the chief pleasure left was the constant visits of his near friends in Camden and Philadelphia and the rarer arrivals of those who lived farther off. Among the most frequent visitors were Horace Traubel of Camden and T. B. Harned, a lawyer of Philadelphia, who, with Bucke, became his executors. Traubel also published a book of very interesting conversations with Whitman. Birthday celebrations began in 1888 at Harned's house, but the last had to be held in his own. In December 1891 he was attacked by congestion of the lungs, but his great physical vitality kept him alive, slowly growing weaker, for three months more. He died on March 27, 1892.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS AND COMPARISONS

WHITMAN'S poems were, like those of other poets, written at different times, on different subjects, and in different moods. But there was, for good and evil, far more unity, or far less variety, in them than in the work of most poets, and he was able to combine them all in one book under one title, the curious and beautiful *Leaves of Grass*. In the last edition he saw, that of 1891-92, he inserted a note saying that he wished all future editions to follow that one strictly and absolutely. And this is clearly the right course. Its rightness is confirmed by the extreme insignificance of the poems rejected by him and subsequently printed, as so often happens, by injudicious friends. A world much overburdened with books would be greatly benefited if our generation could unlearn the modern practice of printing every scrap of paper on which a great author's handwriting can be found, and, what is almost as mischievous, reprinting every ephemeral communication which he ever issued to the press. A writer of genius has nothing to gain and may have much to lose from the publication of his schoolboy verses and the articles he contributed to provincial journals. In nearly all cases editors only insult their hero by

doing the work of resurrectionists. There are very few exceptions to the rule that it is best, in the interest both of authors and the public, to print only the works by which the writer himself finally wished to be known and judged. It has certainly been no service to Whitman that, contrary to his own judgement, some of his friends have dug up out of their quiet and decent grave of oblivion a great many pieces of prose and verse which, if read at all, can only lower his reputation or occupy time and attention which would otherwise be given to the *Leaves of Grass*. It is on these last, and these only, that his claim to a place among English Men of Letters is founded, and nothing else, no other verse at any rate, will be studied in this book.

The final arrangement of the *Leaves* is not chronological, and, so far as I know, no materials exist for determining the exact dates of most of the poems. The broad chronological division in Whitman's poetry as in his life is that between what was written before the war and what was written after. But in the arrangement he adopted some of the poems which precede the *Drum-Taps,* as, for instance, the *Song of the Exposition,* clearly refer to the war, and must therefore have been written after it. So the *Song of the Redwood Tree* was actually written towards the end of his life. And some at least of the early poems, as, for instance, *A Song for Occupations,* were afterwards freely rewritten. The final arrangement appears to follow some scheme of successive parts balancing each other and ending with old age. But the arrangement is a very free one, and it is not easy to discuss his poems on any chronological system of early, middle and later, as is convenient with many poets. But such

divisions, if they could be strictly established, would be of much less interest in dealing with Whitman than with most poets. Except from the war he learnt nothing all his life. Most poets, even poets so short-lived as Keats and Shelley, change considerably both as men and as artists in the course of their lives. The longer lived, like Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, exhibit a gulf of division between youth and age, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Lear, Allegro* and *Samson,* the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets.* There is nothing of this kind in Whitman. He himself and his poems were exactly the same at the end as they were at the beginning, with the single exception that his experiences in the war deepened and solemnised the human tenderness which had been from the first a marked feature of his character. He came away from those years in the hospitals a man on whom love and death had each set the mark of a final seal, and, naturally enough, the marks only grew deeper during the twenty years he spent in watching the slow approach of his own last hour. Otherwise his cheerful temperament, his easy and confident sciolism, his preference for the company of people who were even less educated than himself, the bedrock of illiterate conceit which kept him almost entirely uninfluenced even by the great writers whom he was fondest of reading, all combined to take him almost unchanged, either in character or in opinion, through a rather long life. He began life with the notion, not very unnatural in a young artisan conscious of genius and equally ignorant of history, literature and science, that a new world quite unlike the old was then beginning, with a new religion of which he was to be the prophet. He

asserted that in fifty years the old order of priests and poets would have completely disappeared with all their associations, and been replaced by what he calls the "superior breed" of the "gangs of kosmos and prophets *en masse*" with "every man" (especially what he called "the average man") "his own priest". He lived through most of the fifty years, and at the end of them "the average man" showed no more sign of becoming a prophet, even to himself, than he had shown at the beginning. The American continued to show himself a man just like the men of other countries and of previous centuries. He was a variety and a development, of course, but he was not, as Whitman expected him to be, a new creature. There was no break, either in politics or in literature or in life, of the continuity of the generations of men. But Whitman learnt nothing from these disappointments; and though he did sometimes acknowledge the debt of his time and country to the culture of other countries and other times, he seems generally to have clung to the strange delusion that in literature and politics and almost in philosophy America and he had inaugurated a new order of things quite independent of all that had been done or said by the great nations and great men of the past. All this produces an undeniable monotony in his work, and adds a difficulty to the task of the student or critic, who cannot find any very obvious stages or classes into which to break up the poetry. In dealing with other poets it is natural to write a chapter on the lyrics, another on the dramas, another on the narrative poems, and so on. But in Whitman there are no divisions of form and scarcely any of subject. You might indeed classify his work under

such headings as Poems of Youth and Sea, Poems of Democracy and Politics, Poems of Sea and Land, Poems of War, Poems of Mysticism, Faith and Death. But many of the poems would have a claim to belong to all these classes; very few could be definitely and conclusively consigned to one. Or you might say that he had in fact all through his life three subjects, himself, the average man, and the universe. But the three subjects would prove to be one. Whitman is not the only poet to project himself into the universe and then again contract the universe to fit the measure of his own mind. Indeed that double process may be said to be of the very essence of poetry: the imagination, feeling itself insignificant in the presence of the vast whole, feels also that the whole is dead except so far as the imagination gives it life. The most essential article in the creed of poetry is faith in the ultimate unity of the whole. That faith was the very essence of the spirit of Whitman. At his worst he makes it ridiculous and almost meaningless by blurring or even denying all the differences in the parts which make the richness of the whole. At his best he is not denying these distinctions of the intellect; he is not concerning himself with them at all; the intensity of his vision is fixed on a unity great enough to include and yet to allow us to forget all kinds and degrees of unlikeness and inequality. It may be well, before trying to break up his book either according to his own or to any other divisions, to attempt some account of the general impression it makes. And one of the very first elements in that impression will be this very faith in the oneness of the universe. In the extraordinary *Song of Myself,* which was the opening poem of the

first edition of the *Leaves,* set there as a challenge and defiance to all critics and conventional persons, he at once struck this note as strongly though not as beautifully as in later poems.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed.

. . . . . .

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier.

His faith in immortality is a faith that all things are great and all are one, and that it is impossible to believe that the parts of that great unity can cease to be.

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's
compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a
burnt stick at night.

. . . . . .

My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time.

This is perhaps rather rhetoric than poetry. But sincere rhetoric is always trembling on the edge of poetry, and the same sense of oneness and vastness comes in other places of the same poem where the secret of the universe flashes back in his eyes from some ordinary sight which has no meaning for ordinary men:

Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy shade,
what is that you express in your eyes?
It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.

Nature for him is no spectacle, no mere assemblage of material atoms in eternal motion and change. There never was a poet who, more passionately than Whitman, found in Nature a companion, a friend, a lover with whom he constantly enacts the great mystery of love; losing himself in the Beloved only to find that the Beloved is one with himself, and that both in their oneness with each other discover themselves as partaking of a Unity beyond themselves.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love.

This universality of love was the greatest spiritual fact in Whitman, inspired all that was greatest in his thought, and was the quality which made wise men mention his book in the same breath with Plato and the

Bible. No one who is not attracted by it can possibly be attracted by him. It is the essence of his greatness. But many who would be attracted by it never discover it because of the many obstructions of every kind which he places in the path. It is not merely that the reader who comes to him fresh from the great English poets is at once irritated and even repelled by his form or rather by his apparent formlessness. There is much more than the metre or the lack of it to irritate such a reader. He thinks of poetry (and no one more than Whitman proves how right he is in so thinking) as something which cannot be born except of a nature whose whole being is to a greater or less extent under emotional and imaginative excitement. He finds that much of Whitman's verse appears to be the result of an energy which is almost purely intellectual; or that, if emotional at all, it exhibits, not the profound and pregnant emotion of poetry, making great demands on those who come into contact with it, but the fluent, comparatively trivial and superficial emotion of rhetoric which all can follow and all forget. Take the very first poem in the *Leaves* as finally arranged.

One's self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

It is not merely the oddness and ugliness of the language: the "En-Masse", which is not English; the

"top to toe", which is ridiculous; the "Modern Man", which is pure prose. It is the lack of any purely poetic power. The lines are a statement, a very interesting and characteristic statement, striking the note which is the commonest though not the greatest of the whole book; but the statement is hardly at all a poem. It at once exhibits the fatal influence which his Tammany Hall speechifying experiences and his journalistic training had on him. How different his sense of language and style might have been if its training had been left entirely in the hands of the Bible and the *Waverley Novels* and the other great books which he would take with him on his boyish rambles by the sea-shore! He might have written as pure an English as Bunyan himself. But the cheap rhetoric of political meetings and the self-important trivialities of provincial newspapers overlaid and tainted all that. The big books were not forgotten: he was reading those very two, Scott and the Bible, in the last weeks of his life. But they had not been allowed to take complete hold of him and do for him what the Bible did for Bunyan, what the Bible and Spenser and the Greek and Latin classics did for Milton; that is, give him the tone and manner of great literature. They need not, indeed they could not, have kept him from being himself. Who is more himself than Bunyan? Is there a line in all Milton which could have been written by any one else? It is not men of genius who are conquered by their education, and "Walt" would have been "Walt" if he had lived always in his workshop, and by the sea, and with no reading but the great books. As it was, the Tammany meetings taught him a habit of repeating himself with a rather empty verbosity which did not

always disdain the intellectual level of a Tammany audience, while the Brooklyn newspaper office left him with the notion that one fact is as good as another and that a miscellaneous collection of them described in the language of the streets is the very thing to fill your pages with; all of which may have been useful doctrine, and even true, for the Brooklyn editor, but was false and fatal for the poet. The orator and editor in fact had to be suppressed before the poet could do his proper work; and it is curious to notice how completely, as a rule, they are suppressed when the imagination and emotion, which are the poet's qualities, are strongly moved. In the best of the war poems and the best of the sea poems, in the various lyrics of death, he hardly ever indulges in the tedious catalogues or in the vulgar jargon, made up of several languages and belonging to none, which disfigure the less inspired poems. When once he is really moved he has no time to compile these auctioneering inventories of things in general, and he instinctively tends to draw back from any word that is not pure English. Naturally enough he did not like Milton, the most learned, splendid, and in the best sense, aristocratic of poets, the most consummate artist the English race has produced. Yet it is interesting to observe that it is precisely Milton who exhibits one or two curious parallels with him. Like Whitman, Milton had been a journalist, or what corresponded to a journalist in his day. And like Whitman he suffered from it. Even he, scholar and artist from his cradle, did not quite resist that powerful contagion. Even he, when the spirit of the pamphleteer was fresh upon him, could write such poor stuff as the *Tetrachordon* sonnets,

with their "stall-reader" crying "Bless us what a word on", and their other crude barbarisms. And the second poem of the *Leaves of Grass* illustrates another parallel. No doubt Whitman was quite unconscious of it, but the poem sounds exactly like an echo of Milton's repeated expressions in *Paradise Lost* of his contempt for war as the theme of epic and of his resolve to set the highest poetry to higher uses. Yet both Milton and Whitman engaged passionately in a civil war, though neither bore arms. And though Milton's cause was defeated and Whitman's triumphed, it is certain that the later poetry of both alike was immeasurably enriched by the passion, sorrow and sufferings which each experienced during and after war.

But there is a parallel, which is also a contrast, between Milton and Whitman in a matter much more general and important than these two details. Both are among the most political of poets. Neither understood the art of politics as Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Tennyson did. Nor, except that both were haters of tyrants, whether royal or ecclesiastical, and prophets of every kind of freedom, whether of thought or action, was there any great affinity between their political outlook. It is not merely a question of the inevitable differences between seventeenth-century England and nineteenth-century America. There is much more than that. Milton was an aristocratic republican after the fashion of Rome, and Whitman an equalitarian democrat after the fashion of Rousseau. Two things wider apart are not easily found. Yet the two poets are alike in this: that in their poetry more than in any other in our language politics are a consciously-felt presence. This is true of Whitman all through and

of everything Milton wrote after the Restoration. Each was passionately possessed by a political doctrine which everywhere pervades his poetry. For Milton it was civil and religious freedom, nobly conceived but often inconsistently interpreted into the compulsory and violent conversion or subjection of all fools and sinners. For Whitman it was again civil and religious freedom. But, as that was not questioned in his time and country except in the great exception of negro slavery, the most passionate article of Whitman's creed was not liberty but equality; again generously and nobly conceived, but too often interpreted in plain inconsistence with the outstanding fact of universal and inevitable human inequality. The immediate point, however, is not its truth or falsity, but the fact that it brings politics into all parts of the *Leaves*. And, after Whitman's fashion, it brings them in directly, undisguisedly, nakedly. Milton's politics have always irritated Tories and Churchmen like Dr. Johnson, and to a certain extent also all the people whose æsthetic development has been greater than their moral or practical, so that they regard all politics as dull and rather vulgar. But then Milton's art affords people of that sort such magnificent compensations that it is only the most obstinate who can permanently turn away from him. Besides, his politics, except in a few sonnets, are always indirect and allusive, veiled in a glory of Hebrew or Roman remoteness. Those who find politics a bore get no concessions or compensations from Whitman. He and his "average man" stare very close at you from every page, exactly as they walked the streets of Brooklyn or Washington in his day, exactly as they attended public meetings and read

newspapers and chose for all sorts of offices those "elected persons" whose "never-ending audacity" Whitman is always urging them to keep in check.

The two influences of the politician and the journalist, the second-rate politician and the second-rate journalist, are present almost everywhere in the *Leaves,* and they more than anything else are responsible for the irritation and contempt the book has aroused in so many lovers of poetry. Too many of the poems read like provincial leading articles or town councillor's speeches or, perhaps worst of all, like a collection of "faits divers" compiled by a journalist who has got to fill a column somehow, and for doing it relies upon the insatiable appetite of the uneducated for insignificant and disconnected occurrences. Whitman's items are seldom, in reality, merely that, because there is nearly always some suggestion of his passion of conviction to be felt in them by those who can overcome the first impression of triviality. But many cannot overcome it, and it is Whitman's own fault that they do not. When he writes

> This is the city and I am one of the citizens,
> Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets, newspapers, schools,
> The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate,

it is not merely that his style and language do not appear to be those of poetry at all—a matter which I will discuss later on—it is that his mood, his state of mind and feeling, does not appear to be that of poetry. So the unlikeness to Milton in Whitman the politician and journalist is, as would be expected, more conspicuous than the likeness. But that is not the only point either of likeness or of unlikeness. When Whitman

indignantly calls poetry away from the ugly deeds of war "fit for wild tigers or for lop-tongued wolves, not reasoning men", and from the empty toys of love—

Away with love-verses sugar'd in rhyme, the intrigues, amours of idlers,
Fitted for only banquets of the night where dancers to late music slide—

he reminds us of Milton, not only in what he rejects, but even in some of the very words of his rejection. Do we not seem here to catch an echo of the language in which Milton more than once expresses his contempt both for war and for "court amours, mix'd dance, and wanton masque"? But the contrast is of course more remarkable than the resemblance. It is not merely that Whitman's alternative to the old themes of poetry is not Milton's. It is that his whole presentment of it is a thousand miles away from the manner of Milton:

To you ye reverent sane sisters,
I raise a voice for far superber themes for poets and for art,
To exalt the present and the real,
To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade,
To sing in songs how exercise and chemical life are never to be baffled,
To manual work for each and all, to plough, hoe, dig,
To plant and tend the tree, the berry, vegetables, flowers,
For every man to see to it that he really do something, for every woman too;
To use the hammer and the saw, (rip or cross-cut,)
To cultivate a turn for carpentering, plastering, painting,
To work as tailor, tailoress, nurse, hostler, porter,
To invent a little, something ingenious, to aid the washing, cooking, cleaning,
And hold it no disgrace to take a hand at them themselves.

I say I bring thee Muse to-day and here,
All occupations, duties broad and close,
Toil, healthy toil and sweat, endless, without cessation,
The old, old practical burdens, interests, joys,

The family, parentage, childhood, husband and wife,
The house-comforts, the house itself and all its belongings,
Food and its preservation, chemistry applied to it,
Whatever forms the average, strong, complete, sweet-blooded man or woman, the perfect longeve personality,
And helps its present life to health and happiness, and shapes its soul,
For the eternal real life to come.

With latest connections, works, the inter-transportation of the world,
Steam-power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum,
These triumphs of our time, the Atlantic's delicate cable,
The Pacific railroad, the Suez canal, the Mont Cenis and Gothard and Hoosac tunnels, the Brooklyn bridge,
This earth all spann'd with iron rails, with lines of steamships threading every sea,
Our own rondure, the current globe I bring.

Now of course there is no reason whatever why Whitman should write like Milton. In fact the attempt to do so has constantly produced the dreariest verse in English. But there is reason why he should write like a poet. Does he do so here? That is the first question and one of the most fundamental which he immediately raises in the mind of every reader. And the ordinary reader at once answers it by saying that he does not. This, he says, is not poetry at all; it is prose, and, what is more, indifferent prose, the prose of the provincial journalist. This first impression does not appear to me to contain the whole truth. But it does appear to me to be partially true, and not so far away from the whole of the truth as the complacent notions of his originality and success entertained by Whitman and proclaimed by his executors even more confidently than by himself. He and they fancied, as we have seen, that in the new American era of poetry which he inaugurated any subject approached in any mood and treated in any manner or language would

become a great poem. But this is not so, if words are to have any meaning. All art is an intension; it both requires in the artist and excites in the reader or spectator an unusual, a heightened action, at least of some, and at best of all, the human faculties. Whitman never knew that because he never knew or cared to know anything about the art of poetry. He wrote about the "average man", and he was quite right. Burns and Wordsworth taught us once for all that poetry is not limited in its choice of subject to heroes, extraordinary personages, and "moving accidents". But Whitman thought he could write of average persons and ordinary incidents while himself in an average and ordinary state of mind, and that the result would be poetry. And there he is mistaken. It is only poetry so far as he is in an extraordinary state of mind. Wordsworth began by thinking, or by fancying he thought, that poetry could use the every-day language of ordinary men and women. But that would have produced verse of the sort he most disliked, verse like Pope's

A youth of frolics, an old age of cards,

which is very near indeed to the language and tone of ordinary conversation. But Wordsworth had too much poetic instinct often to use that sort of language, and when he did he wrote what is now seldom read, or only read because, like that stupid piece of naturalism,

This morning gives us promise of a glorious day,

it is part of a great poem which it does what it can to spoil. In his great years, at any rate, he seldom did this, because he knew that "men thirst for power" and that poetry satisfies that thirst by being something in

which perception, emotion, imagination find their powers of activity redoubled; in which the delights of the ear, the memory, and the mind are joined together to make up a new felicity not to be experienced elsewhere, which is the experience of poetry. He knew, in fact, what Whitman never realised, that poetry, like all art, demands excess. It has to make all things in some sense new: it has to get out of the mood in which a primrose by the river brim is, as he said, a yellow primrose and nothing more. Now Whitman, who did not like Wordsworth any more than he liked Milton, owed a great deal more than he knew to Wordsworth. Or at least was much more akin to Wordsworth than he knew. For it was Wordsworth more than any one else who gave to poetry its freedom to call nothing common or unclean. When Whitman brought the average man into poetry he was only advancing in a path first cleared and levelled by Wordsworth. One half of Wordsworth's genius lay precisely there: in the discovery that the plain man has his place in poetry as well as the hero, the daisy as well as the rose, common life and ordinary incidents as well as great and dazzling events. Like Whitman, he wanted to enlarge the world of poetry; he insisted on bringing men and women as men and women, not as captains or heroines, into poetry, and laid all his stress, not on the professional or avocational characteristics of men, which are accidental, but on their human characteristics, which are essential. Whitman's triumphs were gained in the same field. It is true that he often took a curious pleasure in reciting lists of men's various occupations; but his finest things are built on Wordsworth's principle.

O tan-faced prairie-boy,
Before you came to camp came many a welcome gift,
Praises and presents came and nourishing food, till at last among the recruits,
You came, taciturn, with nothing to give—we but look'd on each other,
When lo! more than all the gifts of the world you gave me.

The power and beauty of this are exactly the power and beauty of Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper* and *Highland Girl*; that is, they spring wholly from the poet's all-embracing human sympathy which sees wonder and feels love where others, till the poet helps them, see and feel just nothing at all. So again Wordsworth, like Whitman and unlike the abstract and generalising eighteenth century against which he was reacting, was determined to bring not merely the truth but the facts into poetry. For him the primrose was to be a yellow primrose, not as the eighteenth century might have called it, an elegant primrose, which is meaningless, or a drooping primrose, which is false. And so for Whitman. As Wordsworth is not afraid of *Poor Susan* and *The Idiot Boy*, and will have every fact about them into his poem, so Whitman is not afraid of any facts about his ox-tamer or even about his knife-grinder. We get the ox-tamer's extraordinary power over his animals, and are told about the animals; and then

How they watch their tamer—they wish him near them—how they turn to look after him!
What yearning expression! how uneasy they are when he moves away from them;
Now I marvel what it can be he appears to them, (books, politics, poems, depart—all else departs,)
I confess I envy only his fascination—my silent, illiterate friend,
Whom a hundred oxen love there in his life on farms,
In the northern county far, in the placid pastoral region.

The sense of human unity and human sympathy is greater than the facts and absorbs them. So with his picture of the knife-grinder, which has a curious resemblance in some points to Wordsworth's *Star Gazers.*

What crowd is this? What have we here? We must not pass it by,

begins Wordsworth and goes on to the telescope and its showman. And so Whitman begins:

Where the city's ceaseless crowd moves on the livelong day,
Withdrawn I join a group of children watching, I pause aside with them;

and after describing the wheel at work concludes:

The scene and all its belongings, how they seize and affect me,
The sad sharp-chinn'd old man with worn clothes and broad shoulder-band of leather,
Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here absorb'd and arrested,
The group, (an unminded point set in a vast surrounding,)
The attentive, quiet children, the loud, proud, restive base of the streets,
The low hoarse purr of the whirling stone, the light-press'd blade,
Diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold,
Sparkles from the wheel.

Both, then, seem to me to be triumphs in Whitman's peculiar manner. Only there is this to be said. Wordsworth complained of the man to whom the primrose was a primrose "and nothing more". To the poet, he implies, it always is something more. To himself it becomes, often but by no means always with admirable success, an occasion for pointing some kind of moral. To Whitman it is often an occasion for democratic speechifying, a much less happy because a

much less universal use to put it to; for we are all, in all countries and all ages and all circumstances, essentially moralists or concerned with morals, while comparatively few of the people of the world are concerned with American politics or can find much support for their actual daily life in flamboyant proclamations of equality. Still, equality, which is false, is often in Whitman another word for companionship or fraternity, which is or may be true: and even the false dream of equality is not an ignoble dream to get out of the facts of life. Where Whitman fails compared with Wordsworth is that he often gets nothing at all out of the facts because he puts nothing in. "A yellow primrose was to him, And it was nothing more." But it must be something more if it is to become poetry. And the something more is something which it is the poet's genius and business to discover. Art is a birth and results from a marriage, the marriage of a mind and a fact. There are here no virgin births: the fact alone produces nothing: before it can give birth to a poem or a work of art it must be impregnated by the action of a human power which we may call mind so long as we do not forget to include in it emotion and imagination as well as intellect. The central difference between Wordsworth and Whitman, who have so much in common, is that Whitman often forgets this and Wordsworth seldom or never. Wordsworth's Michael and Matthew and the rest are remade and new born: born again of the Wordsworthian baptism and filled full of the new wine of the Wordsworthian spirit. Whitman's lists of cities and countries and human occupations are often left as dry, as unmoved and unmoving, as they would be and should be in the index of an

atlas or encyclopædia. Wordsworth at his worst puts something into his subject, even if it be only some watery wine of sentimental moralising. Whitman at his worst, or perhaps not at his worst, puts nothing at all.

It is this, probably, which is at the root of the dominant impression he makes upon most readers who approach him for the first time. He does so little for his subjects that they do not appear to become poetry at all. His notion that all exact metrical form was what he called "lilt", and had become unnecessary now that poetry is no longer written to be sung aloud but to be read silently from a printed page, was partly responsible for this. His ignorant American and artisan prejudices made him fancy that all elaborate metre had something feudal, European and therefore outworn about it; and, lover of music, or the simpler kinds of it, as he was, he seems to have had absolutely no ear for the marvellous musical structures that such an artist as Milton could build out of the material supplied to him by English words. He was not without some occasional flashes of insight about style. That may be seen not only by the grave beauty of his finest poems, of which he may have been critically unconscious, but by such literary judgements as his change of the title *A Backward Glance on my own Road* into *A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads,* and the reason he gave for it that the new name was "stronger and more musical". But on the whole he understood little of the importance of music, or form, in poetry, and nothing at all of association. He justly said to Edward Carpenter that "thought" was "the first thing necessary" in poetry: but he knew so little of his art that he fancied it to be not only the first, but

the only, thing necessary to it. "The rest may follow if it chooses but must not be too much sought after." This of the art in which Pindar and Virgil, Dante and Milton are, if he had only known it, the acknowledged, the still incomparable, masters!

> The two things being equal I should prefer to have the lilt present with the idea: but if I got down my thought and the rhythm was not there I should not work to secure it. . . . I take a good deal of trouble with words, but what I am after is the content not the music.

Yes, but poetry is after the music as well as the content and is ready to work hard to secure it. Indeed it knows that its own content, its proper and peculiar thought, cannot be uttered except through music. This ignorant indifference to form combines with his rather naïve notions about the originality and importance of his thought to create on the ordinary reader a first impression that *Leaves of Grass* is a book of crude trivialities and commonplaces, prosaic, formless, generally unmusical and occasionally absurd. It is obvious that if I thought that the whole truth of the matter I should not be attempting to write this book. On the contrary, I think that impression natural, indeed, and by no means unfounded, but utterly incomplete. I think that few men have had more than Whitman the nature and genius of a poet. I think that, though he was not nearly so "new" as he supposed, he remains, so far as I know, the most original genius America has yet produced. He was wrong in supposing that American poetry could cut itself off from the parent stock of Europe. But he was right in supposing that it could graft a new branch on to the old tree: and he proved himself right by doing it. He had a new world

to bring into poetry, and in spite of many failures he brought it. America grew more in his seventy years of life than some countries of Europe have grown in seven hundred. Born while the triumphant issue of its first great struggle was still a recent memory of unbounded promise, he lived through the second and much greater struggle which threatened that promise, and saw the promise issue from it more confident and unbounded than ever. So far as it was a promise of the material good things in which he took a pride and pleasure recalling Macaulay, it has been much more than justified. So far as it was a promise of the intellectual and spiritual leadership of the world for which he cared a great deal more, it has so far been a complete disappointment. America shows at present no sign of leading the world in literature, art, religion, or philosophy. But she is said to care for education as no nation has ever cared for it, and, perhaps, when she has got tired of making money, she will begin to make greater things than money. Only we can see, what Whitman did not see, what indeed no one saw fifty years ago, that it is more difficult for America and for this generation to create a great literature than it was for previous generations and the old countries. Nearly all the modern inventions which do so much for convenience and for amusement do less than nothing for thought, because nothing for leisure and quiet which are the necessary conditions of thought. Telephones, motor-cars, wireless and the rest give us the whole world, but they are apt to deprive us of our own souls. Nothing great ever came out of a whirl of bodily restlessness combined with mental and moral dissipation. And that will remain the disease of the modern world

till mind has once again mastered machinery instead of being as at present mastered by it.

However, Whitman like Macaulay was convinced that the march of mechanics and the march of mind were two aspects of the same movement. And that conviction gave them both a sympathy with the main current of their generation which was of use to their readers as well as to themselves. Macaulay rendered England a service of immense importance by partially civilising that triumphant middle class of his day whose ideals and self-satisfaction he shared. They understood him at once and delighted in him at once: and listening eagerly to him they unconsciously imbibed from his writings a little at any rate of things above and beyond their narrow range of interests, a breath of the greatest words and deeds of all times and countries. What Whitman had to give was more difficult, and his odd perversity of writing prevented him from ever acquiring that easy assurance of immediate contact with the plain man which is the strength and weakness of Macaulay. Whitman in turn shared his "average" man's outlook, hopes and self-confidence; and he was passionately anxious to get into the closest contact with him. But he never did. Both his unlikeness and his likeness to the "divine average" stood in his way. On the one hand the mechanic dismissed him as just a mechanic like himself; on the other hand he dismissed him as a freak whose stuff was neither verse nor prose, as verse and prose appear to mechanics, or as a prophet whose gospel could not be fitted into any of the only gospels an American mechanic knew, those of business and politics and religion. Macaulay suffered from neither of these disadvantages. His men of trade

and business could not for a moment fail to see that he was a man very different from themselves; on the other hand, all he said was as plain as daylight and what he said attracted them by including an enlarged and illuminated edition of their own gospel. So Whitman failed to do for his generation what Macaulay did for his. But he attempted and partly achieved things of which Macaulay was incapable. The historical, political, and literary education which Macaulay gave his readers Whitman did not possess and could not convey. But in spite of all his crudities he had a quality of vision of which Macaulay knew nothing. Not only did he manage to introduce something that can be called a truly poetic, even a mystic, element into his enthusiasm about that world of expansive freedom and perpetually increasing wealth in which he lived. Not only did his genius embrace all that and give it a kind of spirit of life and joy. It also utterly transcended it. He is always feeling, as Macaulay was perhaps incapable of feeling, the transcience and essential unreality of all those things.

Hast never come to thee an hour,
A sudden gleam divine, precipitating, bursting all these bubbles, fashions, wealth?
These eager business aims—books, politics, art, amours,
To utter nothingness?

No grammatical absurdity can conceal the profound sincerity here. If he enjoyed, as Shelley could not, the many-coloured glass of life, he had also always in his mind the thought both of the fragments into which it is destined to be trampled by Death and of the white radiance into which the colours are some day to disappear:

As I wend to the shores I know not,
As I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck'd,
As I inhale the impalpable breezes that set in upon me,
As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer,
I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,
A few sand and dead leaves to gather,
Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift.

It is in these two things that his greatness is to be looked for. He believed in ordinary life and the average man, and loved them as no poet had ever loved them before. And though he was so little of an artist, this love of his was so passionate that at its highest it attained the purity of utterance which only passion knows. The intensity of his faith and joy in the new world, for which, as he thought, the old world had been a long and slow preparation, is a cleansing fire which burns out of him the trivialities and uglinesses that are his besetting sins: and gives him more than he desired or knew of the rhythm and music which have always been the language of faith.

Long and long has the grass been growing,
Long and long has the rain been falling,
Long has the globe been rolling round.

So he says in that *Song of the Exposition,* of which the first thought is of the workman whose hands have made all the exhibited wonders and triumphs of skill; and of another workman whose hands we do not see.

(Ah little recks the laborer,
How near his work is holding him to God.
The loving Laborer through space and time.)

But that note, though it has a peculiar sympathy which is Whitman's own, might have come from the old world. The note which came from him for the first time is that other note, not so much of sympathy as of passionate

confidence, of the note of faith and joy in life as he saw it all round him and in all the men and women of all sorts who were living it. That may be seen in a hundred poems: not often more exactly than in the opening of the *Song of the Universal*:

Come said the Muse,
Sing me a song no poet yet has chanted,
Sing me the universal.

In this broad earth of ours,
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
Nestles the seed perfection.

By every life a share or more or less,
None born but it is born, conceal'd or unconceal'd the seed is waiting.

And with more passion still, and therefore with more music, in that most characteristic of his poems *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* He wrote again and again of the hosts of American artisans, the new world they were making, the new spirit they were spreading abroad among men. He never caught the imagination of all that, never wrote it in fire, as he did in *Pioneers*:

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd,
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O resistless restless race!
O beloved race in all! O my breast aches with tender love for all!
O I mourn and yet exult, I am rapt with love for all,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

That is the first and newest side of his greatness. But

he did not stop there. All this mighty energy of life, all this limitless expansion of the conquest of the earth, did not satisfy him. He was for ever escaping it, transcending it, seeing it vanish away like a smoke.

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

One of his poems is called *A Song of Joys* and another *A Song for Occupations,* and they are full of the joys of the body and the occupations of the ordinary man. Yet they are also and almost equally an escape from the plain man's occupations and the plain man's conception of joy. They are among Whitman's most characteristic things: full of the two seeming opposites which make him so interesting: his rapturous acceptance of the everyday and the obvious, and his mystical conviction that both in earth and man there is much more than the obvious, and that, wonderful as it is to be an engineer or a farmer, it is more wonderful to be a poet, and much more wonderful to be a man.

O to make the most jubilant song!
Full of music—full of manhood, womanhood, infancy!
Full of common employments—full of grain and trees.

O for the voices of animals—O for the swiftness and balance of fishes!
O for the dropping of raindrops in a song!
O for the sunshine and motion of waves in a song!

O the joy of my spirit—it is uncaged—it darts like lightning!
It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time,
I will have thousands of globes and all time.

O the engineer's joy! to go with a locomotive!
To hear the hiss of steam, the merry shriek, the steam-whistle, the laughing locomotive!
To push with resistless way and speed off in the distance.

O the gleesome saunter over fields and hillsides!
The leaves and flowers of the commonest weeds, the moist fresh stillness of the woods,
The exquisite smell of the earth at daybreak, and all through the forenoon.

O the horseman's and horsewoman's joys!
The saddle, the gallop, the pressure upon the seat, the cool gurgling by the ears and hair.

. . . . . .

O to go back to the place where I was born,
To hear the birds sing once more,
To ramble about the house and barn and over the fields once more,
And through the orchard and along the old lanes once more.

O to have been brought up on bays, lagoons, creeks, or along the coast,
To continue and be employ'd there all my life,
The briny and damp smell, the shore, the salt weeds exposed at low water,
The work of fishermen, the work of the eel-fisher and clam-fisher;
I come with my clam-rake and spade, I come with my eel-spear,
Is the tide out? I join the group of clam-diggers on the flats,
I laugh and work with them, I joke at my work like a mettlesome young man;
In winter I take my eel-basket and eel-spear and travel out on foot on the ice—I have a small axe to cut holes in the ice,
Behold me well-clothed going gayly or returning in the afternoon, my brood of tough boys accompanying me,
My brood of grown and part-grown boys, who love to be with no one else so well as they love to be with me,
By day to work with me, and by night to sleep with me.

. . . . . .

(O something pernicious and dread!
Something far away from a puny and pious life!
Something unproved! something in a trance!
Something escaped from the anchorage and driving free.)

. . . . . .

O to realise space!
The plenteousness of all, that there are no bounds,
To emerge and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and flying clouds, as one with them.

. . . . . .

Yet O my soul supreme!
Know'st thou the joys of pensive thought?
Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?
Joys of the solitary walk, the spirit bow'd yet proud, the suffering and the struggle?
The agonistic throes, the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings day or night?
Joys of the thought of Death, the great spheres Time and Space?
Prophetic joys of better, loftier love's ideals, the divine wife, the sweet, eternal, perfect comrade?
Joys all thine own undying one, joys worthy thee O soul.

. . . . . .

O to struggle against great odds, to meet enemies undaunted!
To be entirely alone with them, to find how much one can stand!
To look strife, torture, prison, popular odium, face to face!
To mount the scaffold, to advance to the muzzles of guns with perfect nonchalance!
To be indeed a God!

O to sail to sea in a ship!
To leave this steady unendurable land,
To leave the tiresome sameness of the streets, the side-walks and the houses,
To leave you O you solid motionless land, and entering a ship,
To sail and sail and sail!

O to have life henceforth a poem of new joys!
To dance, clap hands, exult, shout, skip, leap, roll on, float on!
To be a sailor of the world bound for all ports,
A ship itself, (see indeed these sails I spread to the sun and air,)
A swift and swelling ship full of rich words, full of joys.

But the escape of the mystic, whether from joys or from sorrows, is more often to a silence beyond joy

or sorrow. So it is again and again in the *Drum-Taps,* in the little poem of the astronomer, or in the beautiful poem out of *Sea-Drift* called *On the Beach at Night.*

On the beach at night,
Stands a child with her father,
Watching the east, the autumn sky.

Up through the darkness,
While ravening clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses spreading,
Lower sullen and fast athwart and down the sky,
Amid a transparent clear belt of ether yet left in the east,
Ascends large and calm the lord-star Jupiter,
And nigh at hand, only a very little above,
Swim the delicate sisters the Pleiades.

From the beach the child holding the hand of her father,
Those burial clouds that lower victorious soon to devour all,
Watching, silently weeps.

Weep not, child,
Weep not, my darling,
With these kisses let me remove your tears,
The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious,
They shall not long possess the sky, they devour the stars only in apparition,
Jupiter shall emerge, be patient, watch again another night, the Pleiades shall emerge,
They are immortal, all those stars both silvery and golden shall shine out again,
The great stars and the little ones shall shine out again, they endure,
The vast immortal suns and the long-enduring pensive moons shall again shine.

Then dearest child mournest thou only for Jupiter?
Considerest thou alone the burial of the stars?

Something there is,
(With my lips soothing thee, adding I whisper,
I give thee the first suggestion, the problem and indirection,)
Something there is more immortal even than the stars,
(Many the burials, many the days and nights, passing away,)

Something that shall endure longer even than lustrous Jupiter,
Longer than sun or any revolving satellite,
Or the radiant sisters the Pleiades.

What a last line! Did Whitman choose it consciously as an ending or was it an accident? If it was it was one of these accidents which happen only to great poets. With such a line still echoing in the ear one dares not say that Whitman was not an artist. And in any case with such a poem before us, or fresh in the memory, we know that behind all the absurdities, trivialities, insolent uglinesses of *Leaves of Grass,* and much more essential than they, there is the form as well as the essence, the body as well as the spirit, of a true poet.

CHAPTER IV

WHITMAN'S LANGUAGE AND METRE

We have admitted that the conventional reader of poetry recoils with irritation and disgust when he first opens Whitman. The language of *Leaves of Grass* strikes him as grotesque and its metre as non-existent. And he is partly right. But so was Whitman. The reader rightly feels that poetry is not the same thing as prose. The poet, equally rightly, felt that poetry which feeds on poetry becomes archaic, hierarchical and feeble: that it needs from time to time a strong diet of novelty, and often finds a renewal of its youth by submitting to the shock of a plunge into an invigorating bath of prose. At any rate the novelty generally looks like prose to those who see it for the first time. Certainly Euripides, and probably even Sophocles, seemed prosaic to the admirers of Aeschylus. Dante and Chaucer, writing each in his new vulgar tongue, seemed to many of their contemporaries to have vulgarised poetry. Much of Wordsworth seemed the bathos of prose to ears and minds trained in the school of Milton or the school of Pope. So Whitman inevitably seemed more prosaic than he was to readers and critics accustomed to Whittier and Longfellow and their English masters. He was perfectly right in his

instinctive conviction that it was his business to break in upon all that, and substitute for it something newer, something more in touch with the actual life of America. He had to make for his generation that "return to Nature" which the poetry of century after century supposes itself to have made once for all, till it is confronted by the surprising fact that to the next century its "nature" has again become so unnatural as to stand in urgent need of a return to another nature which is at last to be the true and final one. With Whitman this return to nature took extreme forms, which time has already refused to ratify. The cause of this was that he can scarcely be said to have known that poetry is an art. He is himself often a fine artist by a sort of divine accident, but he was equally pleased with himself when, as happened still oftener, he was not an artist or a poet at all. He supposed himself to be producing "something entirely outside literature as hitherto written". It was his business to "take hold of muscular democratic virilities without wincing and put them into verse". And that was a very proper business for poetry to undertake. But when he adds, "I make little or no selection"; when he showed, as he showed again and again, that in his belief "muscular democratic virilities" and, indeed, everything else of whatever kind, all things, all persons, all occurrences, could be put into verse just as they are without any selection, arrangement, intensification, without, in fact, any of the transforming re-creation of art, he was merely proving that he did not know the difference between art and photography, things wide asunder as the poles. And so far as he failed to be a poet, as he did very largely fail, it was that fundamental miscon-

ception which lay at the root of his failure. He supposed that a poet can see things exactly as an ordinary man sees them, and describe them exactly as such a man describes them. But the result of that, if it is anything at all, is not poetry or art, but matter of fact or science. So he supposed that a poet can use any language. But that is another mistake. Poetry, unlike ordinary conversation or a paragraph in a newspaper, has as its business to appeal to the imagination and the emotions. Language which leaves them dry and cold may do very well for the giving of information, for the transactions of trade, or for the inquiries of science; but it will not do for poetry. So again he supposed that poetry had no need of metre, which was, he thought, an outworn superstition of feudalism. Here his case is certainly more arguable. And some poets have not only followed something like his practices, but have attempted a theoretic defence of them. Mr. F. S. Flint, for instance, in the introduction to his volume *Otherworld,* not merely denies, as Sidney denied three hundred and fifty years ago, that metre is essential to poetry, but declares that "the history of English verse is the story of the exhaustion of the effects to be obtained from rhyme and metre"; and even asserts that "rhyme and metre are dead or dying devices", and that we are "bound in the end to tire of those trickeries and acrobatics of verse-writing". He insists upon the need of "a more flexible form of expression", which is to be what he calls "cadence", which appears to be an absolutely free movement unbound to any law and unmarked by any of that repetition which is the distinctive feature of ordinary metrical verse. But

time which in fact gave its judgement against Sidney is giving it with equal decision against Whitman and Mr. Flint. What Mr. Flint asserts is indeed the opposite of the truth. The history of English verse is not the history of the exhaustion of metre. It is certainly the history of the exhaustion of particular metres. But that is far from being the same thing. The eighteenth century exhausted both Milton's blank verse and the heroic couplet of Dryden and Pope. Both had to be abandoned, or else transformed as they were by Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, and the rest. But that was not an exhaustion of metre or rhyme. In fact it was just the contrary. The metrical art of Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson, and Swinburne is far more varied, far richer, far fresher, far less exhausted or exhaustible, than that of their predecessors of the previous century. The only change which took place in the direction indicated by Mr. Flint was a gradual decrease in obvious regularity and formality. Many poets, and notably Coventry Patmore, used much looser metrical structures in which the length of the lines and the places of the rhymes were very freely varied; a device as old as the Italian canzoni; they even introduced occasional unrhymed lines into rhymed poems, as Milton had introduced them into *Lycidas*. This "return to Nature" has continued, and, on the whole, with some striking exceptions like Mr. Housman, the modern poets are much freer and more varied in their metrical systems than the poets of fifty or a hundred years ago, or indeed of any previous period in our literary history. But only a very few of them have accepted the abandonment of metre altogether as advocated in Mr. Flint's preface and

practised by Whitman. Nor has Whitman's example been permanently followed in his own country. Mr. Untermeyer, in his book on *American Poetry since 1900,* and in an article in *The Nation* (June 1922), has proclaimed the return of the free-verse prodigals which, he declares, is conspicuous in the United States. Free-verse, he says, was the fashion between 1914 and 1920. Then "H. D.", Edgar Masters, Amy Lowell, Clement Wood, and Alfred Kreymborg were all "vers-librist". Now, except Pound and Sandburg, "scarcely anyone is left to defend the once commanding fort". Masters writes "in conventional blank verse", Miss Lowell in Chaucerian stanzas, Kreymborg takes to sonnets, Wood's rhythms "grow prim", and even "H. D." in *Hymen* uses rhyme "with more than tentative effect", as well as, at least occasionally, more or less regular stanzas. So what we see, as he interprets it, is one creator after another turning to "a resisting form, to a medium that does not submit too easily". "The poet learns to enjoy the edged limitations of his verse as keenly as the painter appreciates the sharp confines of his canvas. . . . Does not the artist prefer to feel the victory of his will over a definite and sometimes defiant form?" It seems, therefore, that "these States", to whose future poets Whitman appealed so confidently, have rejected his anti-metrical doctrines. This is assuredly not from any conservative or aristocratic hostility to his worship of freedom, equality, and the plain man. The American poets of to-day, and Mr. Untermeyer among them, commonly believe in these things as much as he did. It is, and can only be, because experience showed that his doctrines did not work well. The poets, after

trying to do without metre, found that they could do more with it than they could do without it. They discovered, what Whitman sometimes illustrated but never understood, that not only rhythm and "cadence" but rhyme and metre are forces of expression, without which poetry may have to leave unexpressed the most secret and intimate part of what it wants to say. What is said by

> which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world,

or by

> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return,

or by

> And is there care in heaven? And is there love
> In heavenly spirits to these creatures base,
> That may compassion of their evils move?

is something which can only be said by those words, in that order, and making that music. No prose, no unmetred language, can say just what they, and their arrangement, and their music, and their associations, and their place in the poem of which they are a part, all combine to say: a unique thing only to be said that once in that one way. But we need not go outside Whitman himself to illustrate these truths of art. And to him we will return, and let him show us what he thought he could do, how he tried to do it, where he succeeded and where he failed.

Take, first of all, the matter of language. Here his theory, as we have seen, and frequent practice, was that poetry could use just any language at all. At his worst his language is neither poetry, nor grammar, nor even English. He continually drops into phrases like

Charity and personal force are the only investments worth anything,

which is a pure prose statement, irreproachable but entirely unpoetic: or like

Amelioration is one of the earth's words,

which begins to be ludicrous; or like

O to bathe in the swimming-bath or in a good place along shore;

or

And I will report all heroism from an American point of view;

or

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you would suppose,

which may be said to be innocently grotesque; or like

I reckon I am their boss and they make me a pet besides,

where the grotesque has passed into the hideous, with "boss", ugly enough in itself, echoing and insisting upon the more innocent ugliness of "jobs" which occurs just before. Instances of this kind could of course be multiplied by the hundred. It is true that they sound much more ridiculous or offensive when isolated from their context. The impetuous rush and entire sincerity of Whitman often get us away with them, and absorb us so that we can hardly stop to be irritated by his blundering discords. The fine freshness of his wonder at the crowds of men and women in the usual costumes makes us forget altogether, or pass over with an indulgent smile, the

ludicrous banality of the phrase. It is the business of poets to be for ever opening our eyes and giving us back "the freshness of the early world" when there were no usual costumes but all was new. Whitman often does that with real power, and at these times the freshness and force of his vision can sometimes triumph over the feeblest and flattest expression of it. But it was a continual loss to him that he was not aware that flatness and obviousness and ugliness are blots on poetry, or that when the blots are very numerous the poetry disappears. This is the side on which he seems to have had most and worst influence on his successors in American poetry. Their language, so far as I know it, is not often so flat as his is at his worst, but it is often uglier than he ever is. However, for their ugliness it is probably not he who bears the chief responsibility. That comes of the revolutionary phase through which the world is passing, and, also, of the inevitable reaction against the moderations and decencies of the middle and close of the nineteenth century. Those very moderations were born of the reaction from the French Revolution, and no doubt the present violences in all sorts of art will lead after a while to another return to sanity and sobriety. Meanwhile, we need not be too hasty in condemning them. A generation that has barely escaped alive from the most awful of catastrophes may fairly claim indulgence for some eccentricities. Whitman had no such excuse. His audacities of ugliness were born of his own wilfulness. No doubt they had their uses. They certainly helped to set poetry free from the limited and conventional prettiness of which, before him, America, with other countries, had too much.

Indeed it is not they but his ordinariness, his notion that poetry can accept anything and that anything is poetry, which has had the worst effects in his own country. Men like Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, Mr. Vachel Lindsay, and others have a kind of quickness of wit of which Whitman had little, and they have humour of which he had none. But of poetry, of which he had so much, they have little. They are novelists or journalists, propagandists or humorists, who happen to write sometimes in verse or in something which they divide into lines and mean to be read as verse. But poetry proper is the least conspicuous of their characteristics. And without Whitman's poetic sense of the world they have often adopted his formless methods and, what is the present point, his utter unawareness of the difference between the language and manner of poetry and that of prose. When Mr. Masters, to give one instance, writes:

> If even one of my boys could have run a news-stand,
> Or one of my girls could have married a decent man,
> I should not have walked in the rain
> And jumped into bed with clothes all wet,
> Refusing medical aid,

he seems to me to fail almost completely in that intensity, one kind or another of which is an essential of art. His language and mood are those of the writer or reader of an ordinary news item in the daily paper. Now it is quite true that poetry can deal with occurrences of no greater dignity than those recorded in such items: Wordsworth often did, in one way, Crabbe in another, Browning in another. And recently Mr. Masefield, Mr. Gibson, and many other living poets have successfully brought the commonest incidents into

poetry. Nor is it absolutely necessary that the intensification be that of imaginative emotion. There is the poetry of

> Those other two equalled with me in fate,
> So were I equalled with them in renown,

or of

> The moon doth with delight
> Look round her when the heavens are bare,

and we may agree that this is the highest sort of all. But there is also the poetry of

> Our generals now, retired to their estates,
> Hang their old trophies o'er the garden gates;
> In life's cool evening satiate of applause,
> Nor fond of bleeding, even in Brunswick's cause;

and of the more colloquial

> You think this cruel? Take it for a rule,
> No creature smarts so little as a fool;

or the more familiar still,

> I like the taxes, when they're not too many;
> I like a sea-coal fire when not too dear:
> I like a beefsteak, too, as well as any:
> Have no objection to a pot of beer:
> I like the weather, when it is not rainy,
> That is, I like two months of every year.
> And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!
> Which means that I like all and everything.

Here the mood is that of the average sensual man; not one whit more above our most ordinary level than the mood of Mr. Masters's lines. But the manner! Byron's stanza is a supreme exhibition of that great mystery of art, the mystery which we see alike in Shakespeare and in Jane Austen: how art seems to give us just ordinary life, and gives us something so very much more interesting. Byron in *Beppo,*

Falstaff and Dogberry, Charles Musgrove and Mrs. Bennet seem to say nothing that such people would not say in life. But in life fat men do not talk like Falstaff nor foolish women like Mrs. Bennet; nor do even poets talk like Byron. Art has given to each its own intensification, and to Byron the particular intensification of verse which, when it is as brilliant and as transforming as it is here, is allowed the name of poetry whatever the matter which it handles, or the mood in which it does the handling. But Mr. Masters has done nothing at all; neither his incident nor his language has gone through any transforming process of intensification. They are left exactly as the man described could have uttered them himself, which means that they are left as dull as a photograph, or as the record on the gramophone of an actual conversation. And so with Whitman; it was his central blunder that he supposed that art could leave things exactly as they are and yet make art of them. And he taught a whole generation of young poets to suppose so too. But they are perhaps already beginning to find out the truth of what Goethe said long ago: "Art would never have been called art if it had been meant to be the same thing as nature."

That is the first of the faults of Whitman's language which we have to admit and clear away before we can fully enjoy him—its ordinariness, its meanness. When he was really poetically moved it no more occurs than the jocose vulgarities, which the ordinary Lincoln loved, occur in the Gettysburg speech. Directly the poetic marriage of emotion and imagination has taken place the poet goes to meet it with language of greater

beauty and finer associations. But he seems to have done this quite unconsciously and without understanding anything of the reason of it. His complete ignorance of what he had to do and the laws which govern it is shown by his naïve defence of his use of the word "diarrhœa" in some of his hospital poems. He says that it stands third on the list of camp diseases. It would be dangerous to say that a great poet could not get such a word successfully into a poem. But Whitman of course could not do it because he knew nothing of the difficulty, and thought that he could answer a problem of art by a scientific statement.

The second fault of his language is that he either never understood or often disregarded the rules of grammar. This is a much less important matter. Poets may always defy grammar when greater significance is to be obtained by doing so. But Whitman defied it—as Byron does sometimes—out of sheer ignorance or carelessness, and in places where the defiance brings no compensation at all, and is merely disconcerting and irritating. Nothing whatever is gained by such crudities as "in I myself"; or

> To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade,
> To sing in songs how exercise and chemical life are never to be baffled.
> To manual work for each and all, to plough, hoe, dig.

The first is a mere meaningless perversity: the second a mere failure to find a verb where a verb is required. And his whole method of writing is commonly, or at least very frequently, that of a series of disjointed notes or jottings without any grammatical construction.

A much greater fault, and this is the last I need

discuss, is that Whitman did not know that poetry cannot be written in half-a-dozen languages at once, more especially if the poet knows only one of them. No one ever had more than he of that strange propensity of the half-educated to drag continually into their talk or writing scraps of foreign languages, incorrect, misunderstood, misapplied, or at best unnecessary and pointless. Happily here again, in his very best poems where he is most entirely absorbed in the greatness of what he has to say, the instinct of genius generally saves him from these ugly and ridiculous barbarisms. But almost all the long poems, and many of the short, are disfigured by such absurdities as

> Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,

and

> Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Allons! from all formules,

and

> Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports,

and

> Foremost! century marches! Libertad! Masses!

and

> Democracy! near at hand to you a throat is now inflating itself and joyfully singing.

> Ma femme! for the brood beyond us and of us,
> For those who belong here and those to come,
> I exultant to be ready for them will now shake out carols,

and

> No dainty dolce affettuoso I.

Even in the middle of the fine *Night on the Prairies* we get:

> How plenteous! how spiritual! how résumé!

and even in the famous poem on Lincoln,

> the meals and minutia of daily usages;

while, most ludicrous of all, in the most philosophic of his poems, as he meant it to be, and as Symonds thought it, the name with which he hails the fourth side or Person in his *Square Deific* is

> Santa Spirita, breather, life,
> Beyond the light, lighter than light.

The truth is that in this, as in all other matters, only knowledge is aware of the difference between itself and ignorance. Whitman wrote all languages because he knew none.

It is time to turn from the bricks with which he built to the design into which he worked them, from his language to his metre. Here also his boldness did good service to English as well as to American literature. Custom left to itself always tends to become a deadening tyranny, and it is the business of genius to deliver us from it, as afterwards it is the business of custom, without which all is flux, to absorb the results of genius and reassert its own changed and invigorated self. Whitman found the poetry of America in almost universal bondage to certain too popular metres, generally inherited from England. He began by writing in them himself, and wrote nothing of the smallest value. Then he swept forward to his sudden and complete deliverance. And, in the view of some of his admirers, he went from one extreme to the other; from the worthless poems in conventional form, which he himself would never reprint, to recklessly formless poems, the formlessness

of which he gradually corrected during the rest of his life. It is suggested that in his maturer verse he got rid of the "ejaculatory and unrhythmical" lawlessness of his earliest free verse, and disciplined it to something more of definite form, giving it poise, rhythm, and something like a standard length of line. "That work once accomplished," says Mr. Emery Holloway, in the introduction to his *Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman,* "there was a new poetry in America." Now it is quite true that Whitman gave a new poetry to America, and quite true that he could not have given it if all his poems had been as formless and lawless as some, or a good many, are. And it may be true, perhaps, that his worst aberrations of form are no longer to be found in his latest poems. But I doubt if that is more than an accident or a result of decaying vigour. He was seldom duller, more prosaic, or more verbose than in some of the *Songs at Parting* and *Sands at Seventy,* though the near presence of death kept him then from the complacent triviality of some of the poems of his middle age. But the artistry implied in the suggestion that he consciously corrected his early faults is inconsistent both with all we know of his language in speaking of his work and with his practice as seen in it. He continued to the very end to write things like

> Now triumph! transformation! jubilate!

and

> How cheap is health! how cheap nobility!

and though the lines are now perhaps a little more definitely lines than many of those in the earlier poems, yet their frequent banality and the absence in the poems of any evidence that he has learnt anything

either from his successes or from his failures, disproves the suggestion that he was an artist who was gradually creating for himself an almost perfect instrument. He found such an instrument several times, many times, in his life, but the fact that he threw it away again shows that he found it unconsciously, under the stress of a visitation of genius, used it unconsciously, and unconsciously forgot it. As a rule, he seems to have supposed that the objections to his "free" way of writing verse, such as were expressed not only by hostile critics but by many of his friends, especially such English friends as Rhys, Dowden, and Sir Edmund Gosse, were due to habit and prejudice, to a European, and what he called a "feudal", tradition. That art has any laws or limitations which prove themselves both by theory and practice, was a notion alien to his whole outlook. It is the business of genius to be always discovering that within these limitations things can be done which have never yet been done, and which nobody supposed could be done. But that art is not nature, that poetry is not music, nor verse prose, remain facts with which genius has to reckon. And Whitman, both by temperament and by the lack of education, was incapable of reckoning with anything of that kind. Consequently he thought he could write whatever he liked, and, if he called it verse, verse it would be. It is true that he did correct and revise the rough drafts of his verse, and he sometimes claimed to have taken great trouble over improving its language. It is true, even, that he had occasional glimpses of a severer theory of art. In one of his essays he declares that "it is one of the chief acts of art and the greatest trick of literary genius (which is a higher sanity

of insanity) to hold the reins firmly: not to deny the most ecstatic and even irregular moods: indeed to favour them: at the same time never to be entirely carried away with them, always feeling, by a fine caution, when or wherein to limit or prune them, and at such times relentlessly applying restraint and negation". It would be difficult to describe the business of art better. But most of us get momentary glimpses of ideals which we cannot or do not habitually practise. And Whitman certainly did not habitually, or even commonly, act on his principle of holding the reins firmly. Nearly all his long poems throw the reins on to the shoulders of his verbosity which generally proves a very runaway steed.

That is the first of the disadvantages of his free verse which, as he practised it, involves no metrical or formal restraint at all. We see something of the same kind in bad blank verse, whether the pseudo-magnificent sort of the imitators of Milton or the conversational sort of Browning; there is nothing in it to stop the poet. Rhetorical grandiloquence is a tap which, happily, cannot be turned on by everybody, but which once turned on never ceases to flow. And those who have the gift of flowing talk on things in general will find that it flows as easily in blank verse as in prose, and that there is not much difference between them except the arrangement on the printed page. The thing can, and often does, go on more or less for ever. This danger of verbosity is of course far greater in free verse, where there is not even the difficulty of making lines which are not to depart very far from the rule of containing neither fewer nor more than ten syllables. And the consequence of that is that

most of Whitman's long poems lose themselves in words. The immense *Song of Myself,* in some ways his central poem, could not perhaps have displayed as it does the exuberance of his interest in all the works and ways of all sorts of men if it had been much shorter. And that capacity for noticing and enjoying everything was one of his chief poetic gifts. But the poem pays a heavy price for displaying it. As a work of art it would have gained immeasurably by the omission of thirty or forty of its fifty pages. So both *The Open Road* and the *Song for Occupations* suffer from the dilation and distention of an admirable idea. The primary conception is illustrated till it becomes intolerably tedious. So the ridiculously named *Salut au Monde* has a first section of which nine lines begin with "Who" or "What"; a third with eighteen lines beginning with "I hear", and subsequent sections have over eighty lines beginning with "I see." Whatever value these phrases may have as substitutes for the repetitions of metre is lost long before we escape from them. And the poem is full of absurd lists of peoples, mountains, rivers, ports, and other items which a child may get out of a geography book; so that we find lines like:

> Wait at Liverpool, Glasgow, Dublin, Marseilles, Lisbon, Naples, Hamburg, Bremen, Bordeaux, The Hague, Copenhagen.

No doubt it gave Whitman a naïve pleasure, as of a child or a peasant, to know such names and set them down on paper; but it gives no pleasure to any one, even to a child or a peasant, to go through somebody else's geographical exercise book. Metre, some stricter framework to fit the scheme into, would have made all

this very difficult, if not impossible. And it is noticeable that the nearer Whitman approaches to regular metre the less, on the whole, his work suffers from his natural verbosity.

Here is a typical passage, exhibiting, perhaps, the average quality of his free verse, and something at any rate not below the average of what he made it say. It is from the *Song of the Rolling Earth*:

Whoever you are! motion and reflection are especially for you,
The divine ship sails the divine sea for you.

Whoever you are! you are he or she for whom the earth is solid and liquid,
You are he or she for whom the sun and moon hang in the sky,
For none more than you are the present and the past,
For none more than you is immortality.

Each man to himself and each woman to herself, is the word of the past and present, and the true word of immortality;
No one can acquire for another—not one,
Not one can grow for another—not one.

The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,
The teaching is to the teacher, and comes back most to him,
The murder is to the murderer, and comes back most to him,
The theft is to the thief, and comes back most to him,
The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him,
The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot fail,
The oration is to the orator, the acting is to the actor and actress not to the audience,
And no man understands any greatness or goodness but his own, or the indication of his own.

Now it is obvious that this is not what is ordinarily called verse. It is equally obvious, I think, that it is not prose. It is true that Whitman sometimes treated what he wrote both as verse and as prose. For instance, many lines which appear as verse in *By Blue*

Ontario's Shore appear also as prose in the preface to *Leaves of Grass.* The tenth section of the poem begins:

Of these States the poet is the equable man,
Not in him but off from him things are grotesque, eccentric, fail of their full returns,
Nothing out of its place is good, nothing in its place is bad,
He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportion, neither more nor less,
He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,
He is the equalizer of his age and land,
He supplies what wants supplying, he checks what wants checking.

The same words occur as prose in the preface with no variation whatever except that "of all mankind" takes the place of "of these States", "eccentric" is preceded and followed by "or", "sanity" appears instead of "full returns", and there are one or two "ands" in the prose which are not in the verse. But this is of course a confession of failure. In the preface to his *Prometheus* Shelley says: "Nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse." And most people who read these two passages of Whitman will think that the prose is more effective than the verse. Unless verse has qualities proper to itself it loses by the attempt to escape confessing itself as prose. Much of Whitman makes that attempt and exhibits that failure. But it would be a mistake to say that that particular failure is inherent in his system of free verse. When he is at his best what he writes may perhaps be criticised as verse, but it cannot be printed as prose. Even an average passage like that quoted just now from the *Song of the Rolling Earth* is not prose, whatever it is. What is it? What is the law of it,

distinguishing it alike from prose and from ordinary verse?

This is not the place to attempt a discussion of the whole question of free verse. By far the best short statement known to me of its nature and advantages, laws and limitations, is that given by Mr. Bridges in the *North American Review* for November 1922. Much of what he says there applies as well to Whitman, whom he does not mention, as to more careful artists. Mr. Bridges does not concern himself with the feeling, as of revolt against a bondage, which was at the root of the free verse movement, and was especially strong in Whitman. The number of syllables in a line or of lines in a stanza, the correspondence of rhymes, and their appointed distance from each other, all these seemed to the enthusiasts of free verse as so many chains which the mind of free man could no longer bear. And to Whitman the chains were made more galling by the fact that they came from the old culture of Europe. The question was, and is, how verse can be made without them. It was answered that the principle of free verse was rhythm. But that answer was obviously not complete, as there is rhythm in prose. It is not likely that Whitman ever thought these questions out. But his practice, both in its successes and in its failures, confirms the orthodox view that the thing which distinguishes verse rhythm from the rhythm of prose is that it repeats itself and creates expectation, or, if not expectation, at least echo. This is true of all kinds of verse and of no prose. Some of the expectations, those of Homer's hexameter, for instance, and Pope's couplet and Gray's elegiac quatrain, are caught at once by the plainest reader.

he secures compensation for the lost old beauty of the regular verses, not only by fine rhythm, but by an unusual beauty of words, such as regular verse might quite possibly have done without. But such fine choice of language as this does not come always to any poet, and when it fails him Whitman is left naked. When Shelley writes

> Oh! Love, who to the hearts of wandering men
> Art as the calm to ocean's weary waves!
> Justice, or truth, or joy! those only can
> From slavery and religion's labyrinth caves
> Guide us, as one clear star the seaman saves.
> To give to all an equal share of good,
> To track the steps of Freedom, though through graves
> She pass, to suffer all in patient mood,
> To weep for Crime, though stained with thy friend's dearest blood,

he says what he says again and again, and what is in no way remarkable as poetry. But he is saved from prosaic nakedness, not merely by his instinct for language, but also by that beautiful stanza which gives delight whatever it says. There is a meaning in that beauty which is beyond grammar or logic. But when Whitman says, as he continually does, much the same thing, he has no stanza to protect him, and the moment inspiration fails him there is nothing whatever left. So in the *Song of Myself,* when he has exhausted himself with the beautiful hymn to Earth at night, he falls instantly flat with such stuff as:

> Endless unfolding of words of ages!
> And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse,

and

> I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Or take one of the *Songs of Parting,* where we get still closer to Shelley,

What whispers are these O lands, running ahead of you, passing under the seas?
Are all nations communing? is there going to be but one heart to the globe?
Is humanity forming en-masse? for lo, tyrants tremble, crowns grow dim,
The earth, restive, confronts a new era, perhaps a general divine war,
No one knows what will happen next, such portents fill the days and nights.

The idea of this, the raw material of it, is at least as full of poetry as Shelley's stanza; neither, perhaps, is very full of it; but how much more it comes to in Shelley's hands, thanks to his style and, above all, to his stanza!

To such a criticism as this no doubt Whitman could have replied that it came of old inherited and "feudal" prejudices in favour of what he called "the lilt". But two facts, one general and one special to himself, are the conclusive answer. We are again and again told by those who knew him that though constantly in the habit of reciting and chanting poetry, especially, it seems, the poetry of Tennyson, he never recited his own. That, then, is the first proof of the inferiority of his ordinary verse to the old verse: he himself could not recite it. None of his friends would have pretended that this came of modesty or of a low estimate of his poems. What did it come from then? Clearly it came from the fact, the general fact true of all free verses, that they are very difficult to learn by heart—difficult even at their finest, impossible at their worst. There may be even a curious unconscious commentary on this weakness of his own work in

his fondness for Tennyson, the finest artist among his contemporaries, and the easiest to retain in the memory, just because nearly always with him in his finer things, as always with Milton in all, the word he uses, after he has used and placed it, is seen to be the only possible word in the only possible place. Mr. Bridges, in that study of free verse to which allusion has already been made, mentions several defects inherent in it. But he does not mention this the most serious of all. From Homer to Tennyson poetry has always so delighted ear as well as mind that it has instantly set the reader or hearer learning it by heart. Few desire, and fewer try, to get free verse by heart; and few of those who try succeed. Many people have been able to recite the whole *Aeneid* of Virgil, and fifty years ago Mr. Brandram could recite a dozen or more of the plays of Shakespeare. It is safe to say that no one ever has recited, or ever will recite, the *Song of Myself,* which is about as long as two books of the *Aeneid* and less than half the length of *Hamlet.* The conclusion which results from all this is that, by his lawless and all-embracing freedom as to subject, language, and arrangement of language, Whitman placed his poetic genius at a fatal disadvantage. His failures prove that not even genius can save poetry alive where there is no choice or distinction of matter or manner, and where free verse is allowed to become verse that has no form at all. That he was intellectually conscious of this is unlikely. But his practice shows that he had at least some sort of unconscious perception that, if his free verse was to be verse at all, it must make use of devices of its own in substitution for those which it discards. In all his finer

moments he experiments with some sort of formal repetition, however loose and indefinable, which more or less perceptibly links his sentences together, and does what it can to convert them into verses which answer each other. He has to obtain what he can both of repetition and of variety, the double problem of all verse which free verse cannot escape. Since for free verse, as he writes it, the unit is not a line but a statement, and since it is plain that the sense of repetition cannot be satisfactorily gained by repeating the statement (though Whitman often writes as if he thought it could), there must be some repetition of the form of the statement. His commonest and cheapest way of securing this is, as we saw in the case of *Salut au Monde,* to repeat some opening phrase like "I see", or, as in the same poem, the single word "You", which begins some twenty or thirty consecutive lines; or "I will", which begins many lines in *Starting from Paumanok.* So, in other poems, he uses the device of closing each section with the same line, as "Be thou my God" in *Gods*, or makes the last line repeat the first as in *By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame.* He has also apparently a sort of general rule that the sentence which is to be the substitute for a line must not be longer than can be said at one breath, though this rule is certainly not always strictly followed. The long sentences which fill up Milton's "planetary wheelings" are impossible for Whitman just because his unit is the sentence and, if it is long, has no verse structure to save it from seeming and indeed becoming mere prose. And in his hands this in fact often happens. Besides, the repetition is too little felt to create enough of the required expectation: without either rhyme or any rule as to the number of

syllables the correspondence is too ragged and uncertain. So, though his verse is always (or almost always) free, he often gives it a more definite form than this mere return of sentence upon sentence. For instance, the third and seventh poems in the section called *Inscriptions,* with which *Leaves of Grass* begins, are both in stanza form. *In Cabin'd Ships at Sea* has three stanzas, each containing eight lines, and *Eidolons* has twenty-one four-line stanzas. And the first, partly for that reason, is certainly the finest of the *Inscriptions*:

In cabin'd ships at sea,
The boundless blue on every side expanding,
With whistling winds and music of the waves, the large imperious waves,
Or some lone bark buoy'd on the dense marine,
Where joyous full of faith, spreading white sails,
She cleaves the ether mid the sparkle and the foam of day, or under many a star at night,
By sailors young and old haply will I, a reminiscence of the land, be read,
In full rapport at last.

Here are our thoughts, voyagers' thoughts,
Here not the land, firm land, alone appears, may then by them be said,
The sky o'erarches here, we feel the undulating deck beneath our feet,
We feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of endless motion,
The tones of unseen mystery, the vague and vast suggestions of the briny world, the liquid-flowing syllables,
The perfume, the faint creaking of the cordage, the melancholy rhythm,
The boundless vista and the horizon far and dim are all here,
And this is ocean's poem.

Then falter not O book, fulfil your destiny,
You not a reminiscence of the land alone,
You too as a lone bark cleaving the ether, purpos'd I know not whither, yet ever full of faith,
Consort to every ship that sails, sail you!
Bear forth to them folded my love, (dear mariners, for you I fold it here in every leaf;)

Speed on my book! spread your white sails my little bark
athwart the imperious waves,
Chant on, sail on, bear o'er the boundless blue from me to every
sea,
This song for mariners and all their ships.

This use of the stanza, in a more or less definitely fixed form, is found many times as one goes on in the book. For instance, the well-known poem *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* consists of twenty-six four-line stanzas. There is no rhyme, and neither the number of syllables nor the number of stresses in the corresponding lines in each stanza is by any means always the same. But still the stanza has a perceptible form which repeats itself and creates the regular expectation of verse, the first and fourth lines being short throughout, of three or four stresses and six to eight syllables, while the second and third lines, though again of no exact length, are about twice as long as the first and fourth. So when we get to the *Drum-Taps*, the fruit of the war which he himself said gave to his poetic gift "a sudden, vast, terrible, direct, and indirect stimulus", we find that many of them are in stanzas, and that some of them are admittedly among the dozen or half-dozen finest things he ever wrote. For instance, the beautiful *Dirge for two Veterans* is written in stanzas very like those of *Pioneers*. The poem in itself is incomparably fine; and few will doubt that it owes part of its felicity to the definiteness of its form, which tends to preserve Whitman from lapses into the garrulous prose which disfigures so much of his free verse.

The last sunbeam
Lightly falls from the finish'd Sabbath,
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking,
Down a new-made double grave.

Lo, the moon ascending,
Up from the east the silvery round moon,
Beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon,
Immense and silent moon.

I see a sad procession,
And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,
All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding,
And the small drums steady whirring,
And every blow of the great convulsive drums,
Strikes me through and through.

For the son is brought with the father,
(In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,
Two veterans son and father dropt together,
And the double grave awaits them.)

Now nearer blow the bugles,
And the drums strike more convulsive,
And the daylight o'er the pavement quite has faded,
And the strong dead-march enwraps me.

In the eastern sky up-buoying,
The sorrowful vast phantom moves illumin'd,
('Tis some mother's large transparent face,
In heaven brighter growing.)

O strong dead-march you please me!
O moon immense with your silvery face you soothe me!
O my soldiers twain! O my veterans passing to burial!
What I have I also give you.

The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and the drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love.

This whole poem, even if it stood alone, and even its last stanza alone, would be enough to prove that Whitman, when finely touched, could be not only a master of rhythm and music, but also a master of metre itself, even of a metre which can

almost be called regular. The greatest of all his lyrics, one of the greatest, I think, in the English language, is also in stanzas, though somewhat freer than these: the famous song in the *Memories of President Lincoln*, "Come lovely and soothing death". And the less successful *O Captain! my Captain!* is not merely in very definite stanza form, but actually of the eight lines of its stanza all but two rhyme. Still somehow the poem, though not a failure, scarcely shows Whitman at. his best, in spite of its subject and its evident sincerity. For one thing it contains a deplorable piece of reporter's language—"for you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths"—which looks as if, sincere as it certainly is, it was not written in a moment of strong emotion. And perhaps the metrical scheme is a little too strict for Whitman's genius to be at home in. Certainly the internal rhymes in which he has indulged,

> The port is near, the bells I hear,

and

> From fearful trip the victor ship,

do not come very happily off. On the whole the poem, though not undeservedly one of his best known, scarcely achieves the felicity suggested by its fine beginning:

> O Captain! my Captain!

and touched again by the four lines with which it ends:

> Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
> But I with mournful tread,
> Walk the deck my Captain lies,
> Fallen cold and dead.

It is not merely the "bouquets" and that ungrammatical "lies" which cause irritation or disappoint-

ment: it is a something artificial into which the secret of Whitman will not go. So when in *The Singer in the Prison,* one of the *Autumn Rivulets,* he introduces a hymn sung to convicts, the hymn, which is metrically perfectly regular, is also in other respects like an ordinary hymn and not at all like Whitman. There is nothing whatever of him in such a stanza as

> A soul confined by bars and bands,
> Cries, help! O help! and wrings her hands,
> Blinded her eyes, bleeding her breast,
> Nor pardon finds, nor balm of rest.

The truth seems to be that Whitman could not express himself in any strictly defined metre with regular fixed rhymes or even a fixed number of syllables. He did not know that such metrical schemes are, in the hand of artists, methods of expressing what cannot be expressed in any other way. Not knowing that, he never tried to learn how to use them and never used them with success. In fact, as this hymn and his youthful poems show, when he does use them he is not himself at all but a commonplace versifier. This experience of failure no doubt confirmed the judgement of his ignorance. And both were further confirmed by his political faith in freedom and his temperamental tendency to identify freedom with defiance of laws and precedents and of all things and persons established and authoritative. And the result was that he, being what he was, was inevitably led to the opposite extreme; so that in that mood, writing what knows no law, even of rhythm and still less of metre, and submits to no choice of language, he insists on calling it verse, and persuades himself that it is the verse of America, of democracy, and of the future. But his frequent

moods of extreme experiment were failures as complete or almost as complete as his rare moods of legalism and conventional strictness. In his poems in regular metre he altogether fails to secure the variety without which regular metres become mechanical, a "clock-work tintinnabulum of rhyme", as Cowper said of the imitators of Pope. In his freest verses he fails to give any impression of form at all. The language of his regular verse tends to become prosaic and conventional; that of his freest verse is apt to be a succession of false notes and discords. He himself is apt to be tiresome and absurd when altogether free, and merely dull when following precedents. His successes lie in the wide field between the hymn just quoted and the poems of "barbaric yawp". The finest of all, it can scarcely be doubted, are a few lyrics like the "Come lovely and soothing death", where the form, though very free, is quite definite and perceptible. But there are many, almost equally successful, which have no immediately obvious metrical scheme. Yet when read aloud they are felt to have not merely rhythm, which good prose has, but something of that echoing but varying repetition, the same and not the same, which, a defect in prose, is the essence and glory of verse. If Whitman's freer verse can scarcely be said often to create that complete expectation which is sometimes called the distinguishing quality of verse, it does provide a sense of echo, rhythm answered by rhythm, which is the same thing looked at from the other side. If it scarcely looks forward it never, in the more successful poems, fails to look backward. That is to say, it forms a kind of pattern in which one part, very loosely and freely,

no doubt, but still perceptibly, corresponds to the other.

And now, let me end this discussion of Whitman's theory and practice, what he tried to do, where he failed, and where he succeeded, by quoting one or more of the things in which the poet in him, after whatever conscious or unconscious seekings, found fit utterance and perfect form for the thing he had to say. There are enough of them to make at least a small volume, though such a volume would not be fairly representative of Whitman, whose genius is often most visibly present when it is shining fitfully through a cloud of formless verse and featureless language. But we are now concerned with the whole poems in which there is a true marriage of matter and form. They are of all sorts. There are the lines which provide such a true ending to *Children of Adam,* and make a curious kind of link between Milton and Whitman:

> As Adam early in the morning,
> Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,
> Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,
> Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,
> Be not afraid of my body.

There is *A Riddle Song,* and especially those five lines of a metrical scheme somewhat similar to that of those just quoted, where, after looking for that which eludes this verse and any verse, "which you and I and all pursuing ever ever miss", he seems to come nearest to finding it:

> In looks of fair unconscious babes,
> Or strangely in the coffin'd dead,
> Or show of breaking dawn or stars by night,
> As some dissolving delicate film of dreams,
> Hiding yet lingering.

There are pure lyrics like the *Tears of the Sea at Night,*[1] one of his half-dozen finest things, which I reserve for later quotation; or, again, like the *Song of the Redwood Tree,* dying in California as men with axes and chains crowd in upon its ancient silence; dying and chanting "its death-chant",

Farewell my brethren,
Farewell O earth and sky, farewell ye neighboring waters.
My time has ended, my term has come.

. . . . . .

You untold life of me,
And all you venerable and innocent joys,
Perennial hardy life of me with joys 'mid rain and many a summer sun,
And the white snows and night and the wild winds;
O the great patient rugged joys, my soul's strong joys unreck'd by man,
(For know I bear the soul befitting me, I too have consciousness, identity,
And all the rocks and mountains have, and all the earth,)
Joys of the life befitting me and brothers mine,
Our time, our term has come.

So, again, the successes include incidents or stories like the beautiful *Sight in Camp,* which, unlike the *Redwood Tree,* can be given as a whole, complete and perfect, not losing itself as the song of the tree does in incongruous rhetoric and declamation.

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

[1] Quoted page 166.

Curious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and darling?
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

One cannot analyse, still less can one measure these metres; but one hears them with the ear, perhaps with more than the ear. They abundantly prove what a true poet can do working in a freedom which would once have been thought fatal. It is not fatal. But as we have seen, it is more than difficult; it is dangerous. It would be curious to examine some of the many poems in which Whitman handles subjects recalling the work of other poets who write in strict metre, and compare the old law with the new liberty. The results would not, I think, show the balance always inclining in the same direction. Take Whitman's *O Me! O Life!*

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

This has some resemblance to Shelley's

O world! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb
Trembling at that where I had stood before;
When will return the glory of your prime?
No more—Oh, never more!

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight;
Fresh Spring, and Summer, and Winter hoar,
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more—Oh, never more!

Perhaps the resemblance is not much more than verbal, and that confined to the opening words. Yet they are both laments (though Whitman characteristically enough cannot end with a lament) over the disappointment and disillusion of life. Here, as elsewhere, Shelley is in a world he does not understand; he cannot account for his dissatisfaction or say what it is that he misses, what the joy was or why it is no longer. Whitman, on the other hand, here, as elsewhere—it is at once his limitation and his strength—knows exactly what gives him pleasure and what pain, and his pain like his pleasure has no ungenerous birth. The little poem has sympathy in it as well as sorrow; and the sins and failures which make the sorrow are not outside him like the mysterious something which has killed Shelley's joy; they are, in part at least, within him and his own. Yet, while Whitman's poem hardly lives at all in the memory, Shelley's is one of the most haunting lyrics in the English language. Why

is that? Partly because Shelley's has so much of the universal in it; if any poem escapes into the infinite this does. But also as much or more—and this is the point that concerns us here—because of that extraordinary music of Shelley's wonderful stanza, a music which, like all music, refuses to give a full account of itself—"what charm in words? A charm no words could give"—and yet, being a music of words which have an accepted meaning and not of notes or sounds which have none, allows of some guesses at the way of its working. It is rash to venture them, perhaps almost profane. And such guessing explanations are necessarily prose feeling after what no prose can grasp. Yet can we doubt that some small part, at any rate, of the expressiveness of the poem lies in the thrice repeated sigh with which it begins; and in the slow length of the third line where the lament seems to drag itself out and, its strength spent, come in weariness to a pause; after which—for it is a pause which brings no rest—the fourth line, echoing the first and second, has to ask the question which explains their sigh, and the fifth, echoing the third and double-echoing itself, to give the answer of its hopelessness. The same thing, of course, with variations, may be seen in the second stanza where the hanging and lingering sadness of the third line makes it perhaps the most expressive of all. And what wonderful effect is got out of the internal rhyme in "No more—oh, never more". Three poets of the nineteenth century have built poems round those words. But how poor and trivial Poe's "never more" seems when put in comparison with the grave, sculptured beauty of Tennyson's "ask me no more", or, more

dangerous still, when we are fresh from listening to the passionate and poignant music of this line of Shelley's!

On the other hand, if we recall Hood's *One More Unfortunate* or Browning's *Apparent Failure* and compare them with Whitman's *City Dead-House*, one feels that perfect freedom has enabled Whitman's genius to express itself with a simplicity unknown to Browning, and has helped him to keep clear of the echoing sentimentality of Hood. I do not wish to speak contemptuously of Hood's poem. But is there any poem in our language in which mere emotion has left so little room for anything beside itself? Is there any in which rhyme has played so many and such tiresome tricks? Browning's is of course a much finer thing, with all his cleverness and wit playing round, but not concealing, the sincerity of his sympathy. But here, again, rhyme has its sins to answer for. And the rather gay and easy stanza seems hardly the fit measure, or jesting the fit mood, for such an experience in such a place. Whitman will bring no tears as Hood easily may: it is not the finest poetry that is quickest at doing that; and of course he cannot be learnt by heart as either of the others easily can. But there will be some who will find that though they cannot carry his lines away in their memories, yet they can carry an impression of great-hearted tenderness and perfect simplicity, beyond anything in Hood or even Browning, and perhaps partly due to the freedom of the verse which has no need to say one word more or less than what the poet exactly felt. Here is the poem; Whitman never wrote anything more characteristic of himself.

By the city dead-house by the gate,
As idly sauntering wending my way from the clangor,
I curious pause, for lo, an outcast form, a poor dead prostitute brought,
Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbific impress me,
But the house alone—that wondrous house—that delicate fair house—that ruin!
That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!
Or white-domed capitol with majestic figure surmounted, or all the old high-spired cathedrals,
That little house alone more than them all—poor, desperate house!
Fair, fearful wreck—tenement of a soul—itself a soul,
Unclaim'd, avoided house—take one breath from my tremulous lips,
Take one tear dropt aside as I go for thought of you,
Dead house of love—house of madness and sin, crumbled, crush'd,
House of life, erewhile talking and laughing—but ah, poor house, dead even then,
Months, years, an echoing, garnish'd house—but dead, dead, dead.

Or one might compare Whitman's *To a Locomotive in Winter* with Carducci's *Alla Stazione*, in which that great master both of poetry and of metrical form almost rivals Whitman in the modernity and detail which he introduces into his picture of the train on a dark November morning. Or, again, there is Whitman's *Old-time Sea-fight* in the *Song of Myself*, so curiously like Tennyson's *Revenge* and so utterly unlike. It is something of the same story, and the two poets put something of the same spirit into the telling of it; but there the parallel ends. From the first line to the last there is a staring contrast between

the rough vigour and veracity which is all that Whitman has of his own to give to his story and the consummate art—rhythm, music, metre, suggested memories and associations—which make Tennyson's poem as vigorous as Whitman's and yet a miracle of continuous felicities. The last section of each will be enough to mark the contrast. Whitman's final picture is full of vivid reality and tender sincerity. It has not much music and little power of suggesting anything beyond what it says. But there is a genius in the almost physical closeness of its embrace of the scene which the greatest poet in the world might envy.

Stretch'd and still lies the midnight,
Two great hulls motionless on the breast of the darkness,
Our vessel riddled and slowly sinking, preparations to pass to the one we have conquer'd,
The captain on the quarter-deck coldly giving his orders through a countenance white as a sheet,
Near by the corpse of the child that serv'd in the cabin,
The dead face of an old salt with long white hair and carefully curl'd whiskers,
The flames spite of all that can be done flickering aloft and below,
The husky voices of the two or three officers yet fit for duty,
Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves, dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars,
Cut of cordage, dangle of rigging, slight shock of the soothe of waves,
Black and impassive guns, litter of powder-parcels, strong scent,
A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful shining,
Delicate sniffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore, death-messages given in charge to survivors,
The hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan,
These so, these irretrievable.

Does not Ruskin argue somewhere, when talking of the landscape backgrounds and distances of Italian

pictures, that all great art keeps a window open to infinity? Certainly there is something of that kind in the conclusions of many of the greatest poems of all ages. But that last line of Whitman's, so stiff and prosaic, is almost like a shutting of those doors of the imagination which poetry likes to keep open. It is in strange contrast with the infinite suggestion of the beautiful line with which Tennyson ends his story of the little ship, and her wonderful fight, and defeat more glorious than victory.

And they mann'd the Revenge with a swarthier alien crew,
And away she sail'd with her loss and long'd for her own;
When a wind from the lands they had ruin'd awoke from sleep,
And the water began to heave and the weather to moan,
And or ever that evening ended a great gale blew,
And a wave like the wave that is raised by an earthquake grew,
Till it smote on their hulls and their sails and their masts and their flags,
And the whole sea plunged and fell on the shot-shatter'd navy of Spain,
And the little Revenge herself went down by the island crags
To be lost evermore in the main.

Here at least there can be no doubt. Whitman's poem, for all its fine gifts, cannot compare with Tennyson's, which has as much to say as Whitman's to the eye and to the heart, and a hundred times more to the ear and the memory and the imagination. It is altogether an incomparably richer and finer achievement.

A more doubtful parallel might be that between Mr. Ralph Hodgson's splendid *Song of Honour* and the many poems in which Whitman has a similar vision of all the earth and all the men upon it and all their doings and sufferings. Here is Mr. Hodgson's poem:

I heard them both, and Oh! I heard
The song of every singing bird
That sings beneath the sky,
And with the song of lark and wren
The song of mountains, moths and men
And seas and rainbows vie!

. . . . .

The song of men, all sorts and kinds,
As many tempers, moods and minds
As leaves are on a tree,
As many faiths and castes and creeds,
As many human bloods and breeds
As in the world may be.

And here is Whitman: part of *Salut au Monde!*

What do you hear Walt Whitman?

I hear the workman singing and the farmer's wife singing,
I hear in the distance the sounds of children and of animals early in the day,
I hear emulous shouts of Australians pursuing the wild horse,
I hear the Spanish dance with castanets in the chestnut shade, to the rebeck and guitar,

. . . . . .

I hear the Hebrew reading his records and psalms,
I hear the rhythmic myths of the Greeks, and the strong legends of the Romans,
I hear the tale of the divine life and bloody death of the beautiful God the Christ,
I hear the Hindoo teaching his favorite pupil the loves, wars, adages, transmitted safely to this day from poets who wrote three thousand years ago.

What do you see Walt Whitman?
Who are they you salute, and that one after another salute you?

I see a great round wonder rolling through space,
I see diminute farms, hamlets, ruins, graveyards, jails, factories, palaces, hovels, huts of barbarians, tents of nomads upon the surface,
I see the shaded part on one side where the sleepers are sleeping, and the sunlit part on the other side,
I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,
I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of them as my land is to me;

and

I see male and female everywhere,
I see the serene brotherhood of philosophs,
I see the constructiveness of my race,
I see the results of the perseverance and industry of my race,
I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them,
I mix indiscriminately,
And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth.

There can of course be no question as to which is, and I think always will be, the more popular of these two. The "lilt" which Whitman despised never will be, and never ought to be, despised by most lovers of poetry. And it is not only that Mr. Hodgson gives more pleasure; he also gives, at any rate at first, the impression of being much more moved than Whitman. And Whitman obviously suffers from the monotony produced by the unit of his verse being the statement. He gets none of the variety which even Mr. Hodgson, who here uses his opportunities very little, can get by continuing his statement from one line to another; Whitman cannot talk of

The song of beggars when they throw
The crust of pity all men owe
To hungry sparrows in the snow.

Nor has Whitman any of the variety which even in so metrically simple a poem as *The Song of Honour* comes of the eternal counterpoint between the pattern and its variations, between the metrical stress which should fall on the second, fourth, sixth and eighth syllables, and is being continually deflected on to the first or third or fifth. There is indeed very little in Mr. Hodgson of the intricate and beautiful art of Virgil and Milton, playing backwards and forwards between metre and stress, the art which is always being destroyed by

people who insist on reading verse as if the accents must always be in the same position, and so, for instance, spoil the first line of *Paradise Lost* by putting an accent on "and" and none on "first". But in the nature of things, there can be nothing whatever of that art in a poem whose unit is the statement or sentence. So far Whitman is a great loser by the comparison. But there is perhaps another side to it. He has no need to say anything which he does not exactly mean: no need to find rhymes or ornaments or to force points. Mr. Hodgson's is a fine poem; no one doubts that. But do we not get a little tired of those rapturous octosyllabics before the end, partly, no doubt, because the poet varies them so little? And do not the continual alliterations—"sense and soul", "burning brush for Beauty's sake", "sole, selfless, boundless, blind"—get a little more continual than we care about? And are not the rhymes rather obvious throughout? And do we not more than once find words which, too plainly, were chosen by rhyme and not by the poet, as, for instance,

> The music of a lion strong
> That shakes a hill a whole night long,

or

> And many a song as wondrous well
> With pangs and sweets intolerable,
> From lonely hearths too gray to tell—

where "well" like "strong" does nothing for us except provide a rhyme.

From all these things Whitman is delivered by his perfect freedom. And, though no one could repeat his poem by heart as scores of people, one may be sure, can repeat Mr. Hodgson's, though his has so little

form that it is hard to say whether it can ultimately rank as poetry or art at all, yet there is a simplicity and sincerity, yes, and a vision too, in it, which is strangely moving when we have grown accustomed to its nakedness. That poetry can strip itself of form quite so nakedly as Whitman does here I do not believe. *Salut au Monde* and its fellows will probably remain daring experiments which failed, and are forgotten except by the curious. But they were, it seems to me, experiments worth making, and have shown the way to a freedom which can give birth to art. Perhaps only by this violence and extravagance could the old formal monotonies have been successfully challenged. The soldier dies who makes the first breach in the wall. But the fort is carried. Whitman sent in the *Song of Myself* and this *Salut* and some others to make his breach. They may die of it. Certainly they are badly wounded. But Whitman himself could follow with such lyrics as those we have been quoting. And they will not die. Nor will either the liberty of spirit or the freedom of art which were the essence of Whitman ever wholly die, however ignorant or confused or extravagant were many of his manifestations of both.

CHAPTER V

A WALK THROUGH "LEAVES OF GRASS"

WHITMAN lived to be over seventy, but his whole poetic production can be got into a volume much smaller than would contain the whole of Shelley who died before he was thirty. And much of Whitman's whole is rather of autobiographical than of poetic interest. Many poets, perhaps most, would gain in our crowded world by being known only through selections where their best stands free of the obstruction and offence of their worst. And that is truer of no one than of Whitman. Those who have little time to give to him are likely to get lost in a complete volume, and to miss the things which they might have taken to themselves as an enduring part of their lives. For them a selection is certainly the right form in which to possess him. But for those who attempt, as we are attempting here, anything like a special study of him, a selection is not enough. If we are to know the man as well as the poet, if we are to get an insight into his mind as well as his art, the strength of each and the weakness of each, then we want all that he deliberately gave to the public as the work and outcome of his life.

The object of this chapter is to meet, so far as may

be, the needs of both these classes of readers. I propose in it to go briefly through each of the sections into which Whitman divided his *Leaves of Grass,* and, while saying something of the general content of each section and not confining myself to the notice only of the best things, to quote at least the names or first lines of all that seem to me the finest poems, and so do what can be done in this way for those who are not prepared to face the whole book till some one has cut for them a path through its jungle. And first a word about the famous title *Leaves of Grass*, one of the happiest of the poet's inspirations. One of his biographers seems to assert that it came to him as part of the more or less mystic experience which he went through one mid-summer morning after his return from New Orleans. That may be so, though he does not himself say so in the curious passage of the *Song of Myself*, which first describes what he suddenly felt on "that transparent summer morning" as he lay "loafing" on the grass, and then goes on to give a whole section of the poem to answering the question "What is the grass?" with which its first line opens. He tells us that:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mul-
lein and poke-weed.

And then he continues:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps.
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Something of all this was no doubt in his mind when he chose his title: something which he puts in another way when he says later on, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars". And never was title sincerer outcome of a poet's faith. But it must also have carried with it for him humbler, though not less characteristic, suggestions. Whether he meant to contrast the *Leaves* with flowers I do not know; but it is like Whitman to have identified himself rather with the leaves which are, as it were, the common people of the vegetable world than with the flowers which are its rarer ornaments and glories. So certainly he must have liked taking "grass" for the name of his poems: grass, the humblest, the most universal, the least noticed, the most down-trodden of plants; grass which feeds the beasts and men who trample it under their feet; grass which has little form and no stiffness or rigidity at all, but yields and bows itself to every passing gust of wind; which lives best in the shade, loves obscurity and shuns the blaze of the midday sun. And there may have been another half-conscious reason for his choosing the grass as the symbol of his poems. He meant them to grow and spread everywhere, and if they did was quite indifferent to their being regarded as weeds. He may well have felt that nothing could be a better symbol of them

than the grasses which are the most pertinacious of plants, continually rooted up and continually reappearing, pushing their way into all sorts of places and, welcome or unwelcome, always showing themselves full of life. In another part of the *Song of Myself* he says of his thoughts:

> This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
> This is the common air that bathes the globe.

Simplicity, universality, vitality, those were the very notes which, as he thought, he was now striking as no one had ever struck them before; and what fitter emblem could be found of one and all of them than just this grass of the field? It expressed his ideal; the ideal which he once described as "Behaviour lawless as snowflakes, words simple as grass". In whatever else he fails to be a poet, he is a poet here and one of the happiest of all. No one ever sent his poems into the world heralded by a name of more alluring simplicity and charm.

The first section of the *Leaves* is called *Inscriptions*. Whitman's use of language, or at least of abstract language, is generally careless, and it is difficult to say what exactly he meant by putting the word "Inscriptions" at the head of his book. The poems to which the name is given are not what any one else would call by that name. They could not be "inscribed" on anything. They are just rather shorter expressions than usual of himself and his ideas. The finest of them, *In Cabin'd Ships at Sea*, has already been quoted in the last chapter.[1] It is the first utterance of his love of the sea and desire to be the

[1] Page 111.

poet of the sea at least as much as of the land: and the first use of the metaphor so many times repeated, which sees himself and his book as

> a lone bark cleaving the ether, purpos'd I know not whither, yet ever full of faith,
> Consort to every ship that sails.

This is the only one of the two dozen poems in the section in which the thought has taken enough possession of the poet to compel him to give it the form which alone can make others not merely understand but experience it. Its only possible companion is the characteristic couplet, *To You,* which recalls the brevity and perfect simplicity of some of the old Chinese poems to which translators have lately done what translators can to introduce us:

> Stranger, if you passing meet me, and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me?
> And why should I not speak to you?

But these two poems, the best of the section, are far from standing alone in the business of proving that a mind of a new sort was at work trying to write poetry. The best of the failures are as original as the successes. The very first, already quoted,[1] gives in eight lines the essence of the gospel of life which so much of the rest of the book is occupied in expanding. And others insist on the mission which he always assumed to himself, that of "defining America, her athletic democracy", to the old world of Europe. That these opening poems were not the first written is clear enough from that entitled *To thee Old Cause,* which refers to the war as past and, glorifying the cause and

[1] Page 56.

the victory, says "my book and the war are one". It is interesting to look four pages on and find that he who loved the war against the insurgent South and helped in his way to win it can yet make it his message "to the States or any one of them" to "resist much, obey little"; the first evidence of the love of lawlessness which reappears again and again in the *Leaves*. So the other *Inscriptions* serve to introduce us to other notes of Whitman, his appeal to the poets of the future to justify him, his claim to be the first to "hear America singing"; the carpenter, the boatman, the young wife,

> Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
> The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
> Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs:

and finally his ideal for himself

> To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do.

Having set the scene, as it were, with the *Inscriptions*, Whitman proceeds to occupy it with two of his long poems, *Starting from Paumanok* and the immense *Song of Myself*. Whoever has read them, even if he has read nothing else, knows the mind, though not the art, of Whitman. All the things that he cared most about are in them; all the things on which he struck a new note, a note which, in spite of Emerson and Thoreau, had never been struck before. We have here love and democracy and religion, an all-embracing universalism, a passionate Americanism, a passionate out-of-doorness, an arrogant egotism, a daring sexuality, an assured and boundless faith that God is good, and man too, and the world and the universe; and that the last word of all

will be found to be happiness. The expression of all this is often crude, naïve, ridiculous, even ugly, if you will ("I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world"): but it is never tame or dull. It comes straight from Whitman himself and could not have come from any one else. The Paumanok poem is the proclamation of his gospel: America is a new world and he, Walt Whitman, is its prophet. He will call nothing unclean or even uninteresting: he is keenly aware of everything: "underfoot the divine soil, overhead the sun" and all between them "how curious! how real!" So he begins with a kind of portrait of himself, partly real and partly imaginative (he never was a miner in California so far as I know, and I doubt whether he ever carried a soldier's gun), and a proclamation of his mission:

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born,
Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother,
After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,
Dweller in Mannahatta my city, or on southern savannas,
Or a soldier camp'd or carrying my knapsack and gun, or a miner in California,
Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods, my diet meat, my drink from the spring,
Or withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess,
Far from the clank of crowds intervals passing rapt and happy,
Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri, aware of mighty Niagara,
Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains, the hirsute and strong-breasted bull,
Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers experienced, stars, rain, snow, my amaze,
Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the mountain-hawk,
And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from the swamp-cedars,
Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.

And a little later we get the burden of the new song, so often repeated in the *Leaves*:

I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be
the most spiritual poems,
And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,
For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my
soul and of immortality.
. . . . . .
I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love,
For who but I should understand love with all its sorrow
and joy?
And who but I should be the poet of comrades?

And after love religion:

I say no man has ever yet been half devout enough,
None has ever yet adored or worship'd half enough,
None has begun to think how divine he himself is, and how
certain the future is.

and

What are you doing, young man?
Are you so earnest, so given up to literature, science, art,
amours?
These ostensible realities, politics, points?
Your ambition or business whatever it may be?

It is well—against such I say not a word, I am their poet also,
But behold! such swiftly subside, burnt up for religion's
sake,
For not all matter is fuel to heat, impalpable flame, the essential
life of the earth,
Any more than such are to religion.

The song of the bird to which he has listened is not for the mate of the bird only: nor is it only what echoes in the ear:

But subtle, clandestine, away beyond,
A charge transmitted and gift occult for those being born.

We may like or dislike the verbal manner of this. But no one who knows the smell of the breath of life

can doubt that he finds it here: here is a man whose heart and brain and body are all alive, and are all givers of life to those who come in contact with them. There is a doctrine, or heresy, abroad to-day that art exists altogether independent of its content. But this is only one of the numerous and not unnatural reactions against the much older heresy, enthroned as an orthodoxy by so many Victorians, that art may be measured by its service to morals. Art is art, not morals; and what has much value as edification may have little value, or none, as art. But as content will not make art, neither will form alone: and it is a delusion to suppose that we can think of art apart from its content. Above all in poetry, the counters of which are words that have meaning and associations as well as sound, it is absurd to suppose it possible to ignore the content. The most perfect of nonsense rhymes cannot be the equal of an ode of Horace or a song of Shakespeare. And it follows from this that poets will always, and rightly, be valued in part by the quality and quantity of the intellectual and spiritual material which receives the life of form in their poetry. And even when, as in Whitman, the attempt to give it that life often partially fails, and sometimes wholly, still the quality of the stuff furnished for the attempt is matter of inevitable interest. We can study and use and admire the mind of Meredith or Browning even when the form in which it comes to us is one which we cannot wholly admire. And so we are not to be debarred from recognising the fine qualities of Whitman the prophet or the mystic by the fact that neither prophet nor mystic was always a poet.

The *Song of Myself* which follows is the longest of Whitman's poems and perhaps his most characteristic. As everything of Wordsworth is summed up in the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality,* so everything of Whitman is to be found in the *Song of Myself*. And the Song is as daring as the Ode. The difference is that while the Ode exhibits Wordsworth at his finest, or almost his finest, mastery of his art, the Song falls into prosaic verbosity and never rises near the heights of some of the shorter lyrics. Still it is an extraordinary production, with an almost unparalleled energy of faith, love and, above all, joy in it, each large enough to fold the whole world in its embrace. When you have read it you know Whitman, and know whether to find in him, as Symonds did, the revealer of a new life, or, as others have found, an intolerably tedious barbarian. Or perhaps the reader will find both at once, or each alternately, and scarcely know to which impression he means ultimately to surrender. But there ought not to be a moment's doubt about that. To be kept away from Whitman by his exuberant barbarisms would be as foolish as to be kept away from Wordsworth by his elderly timidities.

Only the briefest account can be given here of this immense and astonishing production of which something has already been said in another connection. Oddly enough the first person whom it recalls is again no other than that Wordsworth to whom Whitman was so much more akin than he knew. Was not Wordsworth always proclaiming himself an idler? He gave his life to singing his "idle songs" as he called them: and of the poet of the *Poet's Epitaph,* who is what he wished to be and partly was, he said that he

both Man and Boy
Hath been an idler in the land;
Contented if he might enjoy
The things which others understand.

So again and again Whitman calls himself an idler and even a loafer: and almost the first words of the *Song of Myself* are

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Has any poet ever said anything which is in spirit more entirely Wordsworthian than this confession? And so he goes on, as like Wordsworth in spirit as unlike him in manner, to turn away from "houses and rooms full of perfumes" to the open air;

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me;

And so, later on,

A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.

The poem is, in fact, for ever escaping to the open air, as all his poems do, and as the poet himself and Wordsworth did. So again Wordsworth, of course, was a kind of pantheist; and all Whitman is full of a pantheism of his own sort, too. And nowhere more than in the *Song*. But here the difference begins to be marked. Wordsworth's pantheism is always held in check by an unresolved transcendentalism which knew that the vague generosities of pantheism would never make all men gods or all parts of men equally divine. Only one side of him would have sympathised with Whitman's:

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

So Whitman's line,

And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud,

might be used as a motto for a book of Wordsworth's poems; but not merely old conservatisms and reverences, but more fundamental instincts would have made Wordsworth shrink from writing what follows so soon after

And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death).

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

It is no ignoble mysticism, this of Whitman's: quite the contrary; probably not a man of us but would be the better for living in it. But are we helped to live in any noble kind of mysticisms by being encouraged to be so remarkably at ease in Zion? It is with this as with his political doctrines, such as his praise of the American people for the "air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors". Is a man really the better for supposing, what is certainly not true, that he has never stood in the presence of his superiors? Or is he

better for supposing that the universe contains nothing greater than himself?

But the poem insists less on any philosophy than on its joyous journey over the world. It cannot be analysed; it must be read. The poet goes everywhere, and identifies himself with every person and every action, good or bad, every joy and every pain. The baby, the youngster, the sick man, the suicide, the boatman, the trapper, the slave, the bride, the prostitute, the old husband sleeping by his wife, the birds and the oxen, the land and the sea,

Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet always ready graves;—

so the extraordinary procession continues, all gathered in, sometimes very clumsily, sometimes with curious felicity. The poet is one with Nature, with body and soul, man and woman, day and night. What he says to the sea is said to all Nature and all man: "I am integral with you: I, too, am of one phase and of all phases"; and he desires to be just as old and just as new as Nature is:

Do you take it I would astonish?
Does the daylight astonish? does the early redstart twittering through the woods?
Do I astonish more than they?

He is himself everywhere and goes his own way, for he identifies himself with Nature, and "the elementary laws never apologise". Death is nothing; it is lucky to die:

The wonder is always and always how there can be a mean man or an infidel.

We are to feel ourselves all one being:

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me,

and we are to find our faith in something deeper than arguments:

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

So the poem goes on, in its second half, to an immense series of one-line pictures of all the doings of the world, in which Whitman seems to have seen everything and found everything interesting, so that he can say "all these I feel or am". This thirty-third section of the *Song* is perhaps the most wonderful of all. I cannot, as I have already confessed, follow some of Whitman's best critics so far as to persuade myself that this poetry of an endless series of items, scores of lines one after another beginning with this one or that of a few keywords like "where" or "over" or "pleased", can be any substitute for the linked wonders of continuity, arrest and variety of the old poets. But both the rush and range of it all are such as it would be hard to parallel elsewhere; and many, a great many, of the lines are not more astonishing in the exactness of the thing seen than in the felicities both of phrase and of rhythm which convert the fact into an experience and make the poet's feelings our own. He goes everywhere:

Where the quail is whistling betwixt the woods and the wheat-lot,
Where the bat flies in the Seventh-month eve, where the great gold-bug drops through the dark,
Where the brook puts out of the roots of the old tree and flows to the meadow,
Where cattle stand and shake away flies with the tremulous shuddering of their hides,

and

Where burial coaches enter the arch'd gates of a cemetery,
Where winter wolves bark amid wastes of snow and icicled trees,
Where the yellow-crown'd heron comes to the edge of the marsh at night and feeds upon small crabs,
Where the splash of swimmers and divers cools the warm noon.

Then follows section thirty-four describing the murder (which he appears to claim to have seen in his youth) of some prisoners of war in Texas; and then the tale of the sea-fight which I have already compared with Tennyson's *Revenge*. And the whole ends with a prolonged outburst of arrogance, sublime or ridiculous:

Earth you seem to look for something at my hands.

. . . . . .

Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.

"It is time to explain myself," he says (to the accompaniment of profane laughter, if we are in that mood; for the words are preceded by over thirty not unegotistical pages!):

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

And yet, self-contradicting like all mystics, he almost immediately adds:

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.

. . . . . .

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

So, near the end, he says, in words which recall the great words of Augustine, "I am the teacher of athletes". It is freedom and life, more and more abundant, that he gives to those who come to him.

The nineteenth century was hardly in tune with this daring message of energy and universalism. So far Whitman was right in looking to the men and the poets of the future to understand him. There is a truer breath of him in the spiritual air to-day. But many long centuries must pass over humanity before any of the mystics, even the most human, the most bodily, the most earthly, can become the food of ordinary men. And there is no need to repeat what has been said more than once already about the obstacles Whitman put in his own path. Even if his food were in itself easier to swallow, the crudity of the sauce in which he so often dressed it would alone be enough to make many palates reject it. The *Song of Myself* is perhaps not a poem at all. But it is one of the most astonishing expressions of vital energy ever got into a book.

The two next sections of the *Leaves, Children of Adam* and *Calamus*, contain the poems of sex which cost him his post at Washington, set the Boston District Attorney in motion against him, frightened away publishers, and filled most of his countrymen with indignation and disgust. The writer of such things, it was not quite unnaturally assumed, was an immoral man, and one who preached immorality. But it is quite certain that he was neither. To say that is not to deny that he probably or certainly did many things in this matter of which no strict moralist could approve, and wrote some things which have had

no good effect on the weaker sort among his readers. He says himself in one of the *Calamus* pieces:

> Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much evil, perhaps more.

But even if this were literally true and not, as it is, one of his bravadoes of confession, it would not be fatal to the *Leaves*. Art, we have seen, cannot receive final judgement in a court of ethics, nor can it be limited by the limitations of weak brethren. Half the works of genius in the world are liable to misuse; so is wine, so is the body, and the whole gift and power of life itself. But wise men do not let the danger of misuse send them into any suicidal renunciation of the prizes or the glories which may come of the adventure of use. To Whitman sex was the central energy of the human body, the key to the power of physical life in all the world, men and women as well as animals and vegetables; and he was not afraid to insist as much upon this as upon its other side on which all poets have insisted, its issue in some of the highest of the spiritual experiences which belong to man alone. Being as he was totally without reserve and possessed of little or none of the tact in the use of language which has enabled other poets to say things which might offend in words which protect them from offence, he caused great scandal and exposed his own character to slander. It may be well before coming to these poems to say a word or two on this latter point. It can be brief enough, for all the evidence is on one side. He himself declared as a young man that if he wrote a book he could say nothing about women, because he knew nothing about

them "either by experience or observation". This, of course, did not long remain true; certainly not after his visit to New Orleans which preceded the first issue of the *Leaves*. But all the evidence goes to show that the view of his character formed by Puritan readers of the *Leaves* was a completely false one. His brother George, a plain, honest man, who had never been very long separated from him, said, after his death, that all these "charges" were unjust and the "doubts" without excuse. He understood little of his brother's poetry, but on the question of his character he claimed to speak "with some authority". His testimony is emphatic. "As for dissipation I know that his skirts were clean." "They get these ideas from writings about *Leaves of Grass,* not from Walt." "He was always correct and clean in his conversation"; and "all those fellows intimate with Walt at night, anywhere, any time, will tell you the same thing". So one who saw him constantly in his Washington days reported that he "never heard him utter a word that could not have been used to his mother". He had no doubt gone through what he called to Symonds "a jolly bodily phase" at one time; but there is overwhelming testimony, says Mr. Bliss Perry, that from 1862 onwards his life was a chaste one. One of those who knew him at Washington says, "We laughed at his poems, but we all liked the man". "He was always chaste in speech", and impressed those who met him as "a clean man morally and physically". After his death the doctor who had attended him and been present at the post-mortem examination wrote publicly: "I wish to silence for ever the slanderous accusations that debauchery and excess of various kinds contributed to

his death." "His illness originated in the strain of the war and the blood-poisoning he got in it." These testimonies should surely, as George Whitman said, "silence all talk."

Nor do the poems themselves, as a whole, encourage such talk. They are plainly not the poems of a Puritan. They contain a certain number of lines which obviously came there as the result of Whitman's social and intellectual crudity and of the rather silly pleasure he took in shocking the respectable. This has long been common in France and has lately become common in England. But there is of course no more sense in spoiling a poem or a novel in order to annoy Mrs. Grundy than in spoiling one in order not to annoy her. Whitman, at any rate in his earlier time, was not free from this undergraduate substitute for originality. And it cannot be denied that there are a few poems which, taken by themselves, are exposed to serious misunderstanding. And perhaps not merely to misunderstanding. I do not think that a man of strict chastity could have written all the poems in *Children of Adam.* I will even confess that I do not think that a man whose feelings about sex have always been perfectly normal could have written some things in *Calamus.* For to say, as has been said, that the *Adam* poems are the praise of sex as distinguished from the praise of love, and the *Calamus* poems the praise of love as distinguished from sex, is putting the distinction too sharply. Whitman, indeed, makes that distinction himself in *Fast-anchor'd Eternal O Love,* and certainly means it. "The fast-anchor'd love" is the love of woman; when he turns to the love of man it is "as disembodied or another born, Ethereal":

I ascend, I float in the regions of your love O man,
O sharer of my roving life.

But the *Calamus* poems are far from being without a physical side, however innocent. And so the *Adam* poems are certainly not merely physical: they are not without their emotional and spiritual side. It is not merely that they have in them the love of fathers and daughters, mothers and children; but their handling of the love of man and woman has often an emotion far beyond that of mere sex, and, once or twice, a peace and permanence unknown to it. The two sections are in fact much more nearly allied than that sharp distinction suggests. With Whitman, who believed both in body and in soul and was apt to identify them, sympathy could no more be complete without a physical side than sex without one of emotion and imagination. Perhaps, as Mr. Holloway has suggested, he retained in manhood some of the characteristics of the sensually indiscriminate affection of a child. In any case, to those who knew him, like Mr. W. S. Kennedy, it is naturally matter for amazed indignation that there should be any question of a need to "relieve the *Calamus* poems of the vilest of all interpretations". So far as there has been such need, the blame for it must be divided between Whitman's frank tendency to play with fire in the language he uses on these subjects and the habit of the ordinary sensual man of giving to the words and deeds of others the explanation which would be true if they were his own. The answer to such insinuations lies in what the ordinary sensual man passes over unperceived: what Mr. Kennedy calls "the ethical perfume of these noblest utterances of friendship". Four lines of one poem are enough to quote in illustration of this.

"I see", he says in *The Base of all Metaphysics,* all the philosophies and tenets of all churches,

> Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath Christ the divine I see,
> The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,
> Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
> Of city for city and land for land.

And there is a larger answer. Love in Whitman is as love in Plato: an energy exalting and ultimately transcending the body, a vital force to be used alike by body and spirit, not a dangerous enemy to be conquered and trampled down. The *Children of Adam* and *Calamus* poems include some that are not entirely healthy reading. But, taken as a whole, what they exhibit is, in spite of all differences, something in the nature of a modern version of the Lucretian joy of Venus, the wonder more than the luxury of sex, a triumph of something altogether larger than sex, birth and spring and nature and all the varied gifts and powers of life. Of these the sensual man only understands the merest fraction: their jubilant passion of energy is utterly out of his reach. For the right reader that passion saves them from misinterpretation. There is in them nothing whatever either of what Whitman elsewhere calls "the sly settee and the adulterous unwholesome couple", or of what is almost more offensive, the dirtiness as of dirty little boys at a preparatory school, with which some otherwise not undistinguished writers have lately defaced the English novel. There is a total lack of delicacy about Whitman; he never knew that modesty and reserve are positive and not negative qualities. But, that once admitted,

these love poems of his are always sincere, and sometimes beautiful, utterances of his love of woman and man, his faith in body and spirit, his joy in his own health and vitality, and his profound conviction of the health and vitality of the universe. No doubt he was apt to press the parallel between men and animals too far. When he says:

> The consequent meanness of me should I skulk or find myself indecent, while birds and animals never once skulk or find themselves indecent,

he forgets that self-judgement and self-control and shame at failing in them are simply part of the price paid by man for the reason which separates him from the merely instinctive life of the animals. But when these necessary qualifications have been made, most unprejudiced readers will admit that he was justified in saying once to a lady who knew him well both before and after the war: "I dare not leave out or alter what is so genuine, so indispensable, so lofty, so pure." He conceded a few omissions of things against which he thought a possible case had been made out. But for the rest he was adamant. Neither Emerson nor any one else could move him. "If I had cut sex out," he said, "I might just as well have cut everything out." We may wish he had cut out more than he did. But no one who is capable of liking or understanding him at all will for a moment wish them all away. Such readers may, indeed, feel that the *Adam* poems expose his life to a certain criticism. For he did not live what is best in them as he did what is best in the *Calamus* poems. He did make extraordinary friendships, with more than one man; and that they were friendships of rare beauty his letters to Pete Doyle, the young railwayman, would

be enough, if there were nothing else, to show. But the essence of the *Adam* poems is the pride, glory and service of paternity: "what the divine husband knows", "the work of fatherhood"; they continually insist on sane and healthy children as the goal and purpose of sex. Now, if he knew fatherhood at all, as it seems likely he did, he knew scarcely anything of it but the bare physical fact. Of his children he knew little more than Rousseau of his; and he knew nothing at all of the great experiences which belong to the life-long relation of husband and father. This must be admitted: and it is a limitation in the poems as well as in the man. But it has been given to very few poets to take possession of the whole of life. And I think that the wise reader will feel that in spite of all their limitations the *Adam* and *Calamus* poems are the expression of a great reality, at once physical and spiritual, in the expression of which no one has equalled the courage or surpassed the tenderness of Whitman.

The two sections are not very long, and the poems in them are largely occupied, like his other poems, with the sights and sounds of all sorts which delighted him. Many of these have nothing whatever to do with sex, but are such things as:

> The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting;

or

> The hillside whiten'd with blossoms of the mountain ash.

But, of course, it is not lines of this sort which provide either the special interest or the scandal of *Children of Adam* or *Calamus*. The longest of the former is

the bold *I sing the Body Electric,* which begins with what is really the essence of his attitude on these subjects:

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?
And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

It is full of the praise of health and vigour of all sorts, as seen in the farmer and his five sons, as seen in the slaves exposed in the market, as seen in the sexual relation itself. A very frank passage dealing with this last mingles all with outer nature as is his fashion, and ends:

Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

One of the finest of the *Adam* poems is short enough to give in full:

Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me,
Whispering *I love you, before long I die,*
I have travel'd a long way merely to look on you to touch you,
For I could not die till I once look'd on you,
For I fear'd I might afterward lose you.

Now we have met, we have look'd, we are safe,
Return in peace to the ocean my love,

I too am part of that ocean my love, we are not so much
separated,
Behold the great rondure, the cohesion of all, how perfect!
But as for me, for you, the irresistible sea is to separate us,
As for an hour carrying us diverse, yet cannot carry us diverse
forever;
Be not impatient—a little space—know you I salute the air, the
ocean and the land,
Every day at sundown for your dear sake my love.

It may be as well to warn the incautious and prosaic that such poems as these no more necessarily represent actual occurrences than the numerous poems in which Whitman represents himself as having visited places where he never was; been present at battles or sieges which he never got within a thousand miles of; followed occupations to which he never set a hand; been a child, as in one of these very poems, in California, which in fact he never saw in all his life; even been born in the Southern States instead of on Long Island where the actual matter-of-fact event took place. Throughout his poetry he identifies himself with whatever he is imagining, and states as an experience of the body what is simply an experience of the imagination. So with the poems of these two sections. It would not be safe to say that none of them are memories of actual occurrences; still less would it be safe to say any particular one of them is. And the answer to those questions, if it could be given, would have only a biographical, not a literary importance.

The poems entitled *Calamus* get their name from a water-plant. The poet represents himself (*These I singing in Spring*) as walking alone in spring, singing as he walks and picking flowers for the spirits of his friends dead or alive who gather round him: lilac and pine and pinks and sage:

And here what I now draw from the water, wading in the pond-side,
(O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me, and returns again never to separate from me,
And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-root shall,
Interchange it youths with each other! let none render it back!)

That is the subject of these poems: the friendship which is love; the "institution" which he, the scorner of institutions, desires to establish

in every city of these States inland and seaboard,
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that dents the water,
Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
The institution of the dear love of comrades.

Like all other loves it feels itself eternal, and therefore is not satisfied with life but falls for death:

O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, I think it must be for death,
For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere of lovers,
Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer,
(I am not sure but the high soul of love welcomes death most,)

And if the thought of death brings doubts and fears:

To me these and the like of these are curiously answer'd by my lovers, my dear friends,
When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the hand,
When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not, surround us and pervade us,
Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require nothing further,
I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave,
But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,
He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.

This feeling finds its varied utterance in some forty poems, full of love and man and nature, the most striking of which, beside the two already quoted, *These I singing in spring* and *Scented herbage of my breast,* are perhaps *Recorders ages hence, When I heard at the close of the day, What think you I take my pen in hand to record,* which describes the parting of two friends:

two simple men I saw to-day on the pier in the
midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends,
The one to remain hung on the other's neck and passionately
kiss'd him,
While the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain in his
arms;

and the poem of himself, shadow and reality:

That shadow my likeness that goes to and fro seeking a liveli-
hood, chattering, chaffering,
How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it
flits,
How often I question and doubt whether that is really me;
But among my lovers and caroling these songs,
O I never doubt whether that is really me;

and the even more characteristic *To a Stranger*:

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon
you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes
to me as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste,
matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not
yours only nor left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass,
you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone
or wake at night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

After *Calamus* we come to some dozen of Whitman's longer poems, of which not a great deal need be said, partly because several of them have been mentioned in previous chapters, and partly because they repeat in the main the characteristics of the *Song of Myself* so fully discussed just now. The first is *Salut au Monde,* almost as absurdly named as the Paris "Hotel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham" of Henry James's *Reverberator.* Like the *Song of Myself* it travels all over the world, and answers with an unending procession of details its questions, "What do you hear Walt Whitman?" and "What do you see Walt Whitman?" It ends:

My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth,
I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.

. . . . . .

Toward you all, in America's name,
I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,
To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men.

The next of these poems, the *Song of the Open Road,* is perhaps the best of his many calls to the life of freedom, open air and daylight:

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road;

and then:

I think heroic deeds were all conceiv'd in the open air, and all free poems also,
I think I could stop here myself and do miracles,

I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds me shall like me,
I think whoever I see must be happy.

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
Listening to others, considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.

I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.

All seems beautiful to me,
I can repeat over to men and women You have done such good to me I would do the same to you,
I will recruit for myself and you as I go,
I will scatter myself among men and women as I go,
I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them,
Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me,
Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me.

Wherever he goes he finds a joy that passes understanding in communion with nature and with other men:

These yearnings why are they? these thoughts in the darkness why are they?
Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sunlight expands my blood?
Why when they leave me do my pennants of joy sink flat and lank?
Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts descend upon me?
(I think they hang there winter and summer on those trees and always drop fruit as I pass;)
What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers?

Like all the mystics his cry is, give up all and all shall be yours. "I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but

offer rough new prizes"; "You shall not heap up what is call'd riches, You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn and achieve." And then, you shall "see no possession but you may possess it, enjoying all without labor or purchase". He calls upon his followers to come out into the open, freed once for all of the secret shames of the self in us all, which is for ever in hiding and for ever "speaking of anything else but never of itself". And the poem ends on the same note of frankness, comradeship and courage:

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law,
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Democracy has never had a healthier or a more inspiring message addressed to it. If the new age can live in that spirit of courage and freedom, as free of proletarian envy as of aristocratic insolence, the world of the future will be saved.

The *Open Road* is followed by *Brooklyn Ferry,* in which he tries to embrace all time as he had so often tried to embrace all space. The "crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes" whom he watches crossing the ferry are not more curious to him than those who will be crossing it centuries afterwards. Others will enjoy the sunset as he enjoys it now, and to them he offers his greeting and his message. There is nothing to separate him and them:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,

Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

As they will be, he is:

Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak.

He is one with them across the separating years:

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

I know no poem anywhere that more vividly expresses that sense, which comes, I suppose, at times to all of us, of something almost like the presence of the people who a hundred years hence will be sitting in our chairs, walking in our garden, doing the business we do to-day, or reading the books that we have in our hands.

The *Song of the Answerer* which follows is his claim for the poet, who, in his eyes, is much more than a mere "singer" and alone answers the great questions, because he alone has the language which all can understand:

the mechanics take him for a mechanic,
And the soldiers suppose him to be a soldier, and the sailors that he has follow'd the sea,

. . . . . .

The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood,
The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar, see themselves in the ways of him, he strangely transmutes them,
They are not vile any more, they hardly know themselves they are so grown.

The picture is of course one of himself as he wished to be, as was Wordsworth's *Poet's Epitaph* of Wordsworth. And the poem again and again exhibits that unconscious affinity with Wordsworth of which I have already spoken: often we get a phrase which sounds like, and may actually be, an echo of the famous preface. The poet "is the glory and extract thus far of things and of the human race". "The words of true poems are the tuft and final applause of science." The thought is the same; even the passion is; but the language! Wordsworth's instinct for language is not unerring, but he would not have followed "glory" with the bathos of "extract", nor spoiled his "final applause" with the dull ugliness of "tuft".

Our Old Feuillage is little more than a catalogue of

> All the acts, scenes, ways, persons, attitudes of these States,

but the catalogue, as always, contains items that only the most curious eye would have noticed. *A Song of Joys, Song of the Broad-Axe,* and *Song of the Exposition* give us once more the universalism of the *Song of Myself* and *Salut au Monde.* No one but Whitman could have written the first; it has in it the joy of the whole earth and of all the men and women on it and all their different lives and doings. As the last word of the *Answerer* makes it the poet's final business to launch his reader out into the universe, there "to sweep

> through the ceaseless rings and never be quiet again,"

so here the joy of the poet is to escape into

> Something far away from a puny and pious life!
> Something unproved! something in a trance!
> Something escaped from the anchorage and driving free.

The *Song of the Broad-Axe* is perhaps chiefly remarkable for beginning with six rhymed lines. It is a prodigious catalogue of all the works of the axe, the destroyer and the creator. The *Song of the Exposition* is less interesting. It is too like the exuberant newspaper articles which appear in all countries where International Exhibitions are held, only that, being American, it surpasses all possible rivals in exuberance.

Of the remaining three of these longer poems, the *Song of the Redwood Tree* is interesting on account of its lyric, already quoted,[1] the song of the Californian tree dying before advancing man. It is curious to find Whitman introducing here Dryads and Hamadryads, beings as obsolete, one would have supposed, as Homer and Virgil and the rest whose "immensely overpaid accounts" he had so decidedly dismissed in the previous poem. The *Song for Occupations* is once more the Wordsworthian sanctity of the common ways of men:

> Strange and hard that paradox true I give,
> Objects gross and the unseen soul are one.

Its theme is

> The wonder every one sees in every one else he sees, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever,

and the truth, preached by all prophets from Moses to Goethe, that truth and happiness lie very near every one of us; "in thy mouth and in thy heart", "in folks nearest to you", "not in another place but this place, not for another hour but this hour." The poem's only drawback is the catalogue of occupations,

[1] Page 118.

which is as universal, tedious and prosaic as usual. The *Song of the Rolling Earth* is the song which never ceases for those who will listen. Under all the busy noises of men

To her children the words of the eloquent dumb great mother never fail,
The true words do not fail, for motion does not fail and reflection does not fail,
Also the day and night do not fail, and the voyage we pursue does not fail.

. . . . . .

The earth does not argue,
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,
Does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten, promise;

it leaves always its best untold, only hinted at; but faith and the poet know that

The divine ship sails the divine sea.

And so this long section closes with a little poem of four lines summing day and night, action and peace into a single unity of acceptance:

Youth, large, lusty, loving—youth full of grace, force, fascination,
Do you know that Old Age may come after you with equal grace, force, fascination?

Day full-blown and splendid—day of the immense sun, action, ambition, laughter,
The Night follows close with millions of suns, and sleep and restoring darkness.

Neither the next section, *Birds of Passage,* nor *A Broadway Pageant* which follows, calls for much comment. The latter is indeed curious to-day since it is an enthusiastic welcome of the first Japanese envoys to the United States and a general invitation to all peoples of the earth to come "trooping up, crowding from

all directions" to the home of "Libertad"; a policy which looked more possible in Whitman's day than it does now. Among the *Birds of Passage* is one giving a welcome to the Prince of Wales who visited the States in 1860. But in the main these poems merely repeat the old sanguine universalism; everybody is both wise and happy; and all things, even flat contradictions like materialism and spiritualism, are equally true. The only remarkable piece is the more or less regular stanzas called *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* [1] which carry the message of life, faith, and action which Whitman was never tired of proclaiming:

> Have the elder races halted?
> Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
> We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
> Pioneers! O Pioneers.

Sea-Drift, which follows, begins with *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,* which has already been quoted and discussed in connection with Whitman's boyhood on Long Island.[2] It is certainly among the half-dozen finest of his longer poems, and one of the finest lyrics of the nineteenth century. The sea always moved Whitman, and more than any other physical fact lifted him above the world of assertions and opinions into that of imagination and vision. Two more at least of the poems in this section, *Tears* and *On the Beach at Night,* would have to be included in any selection from Whitman, however small. Perhaps *Tears* is the most entirely unalloyed piece of imagination that ever came from him. I should be sorry for any one who undertook to write out a prose paraphrase of it; and equally

[1] See page 75.

[2] Page 10.

sorry for any one who was not aware in it of meanings beyond prose:

Tears! tears! tears!
In the night, in solitude, tears,
On the white shore dripping, dripping, suck'd in by the sand,
Tears, not a star shining, all dark and desolate,
Moist tears from the eyes of a muffled head;
O who is that ghost? that form in the dark, with tears?
What shapeless lump is that, bent, crouch'd there on the sand?
Streaming tears, sobbing tears, throes, choked with wild cries;
O storm, embodied, rising, careering with swift steps along the beach!
O wild and dismal night storm, with wind—O belching and desperate!
O shade so sedate and decorous by day, with calm countenance and regulated pace,
But away at night as you fly, none looking—O then the unloosen'd ocean,
Of tears! tears! tears!

The poems called *By the Roadside* are, for the most part, unimportant and prosaic scraps. But *The Dalliance of the Eagles* has power in it: and the poet's escape from the charts and diagrams of the astronomer's lecture when, feeling tired and sick of that,

I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars,

is a fine and characteristic little piece. And so is that of another silence which follows upon other sights from which he did not turn:

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt, desperate,

I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of young women,
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tryanny, I see martyrs and prisoners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;
All these—all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon,
See, hear, and am silent.

And there is *A Farm Picture,* which is in a different mood, the quiet and contented beauty of a Dutch landscape:

Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses feeding,
And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away.

The two sections which follow, *Drum-Taps* and *Memories of President Lincoln,* contain Whitman's most famous poems. Without the war and the part he played in it and the influence it had upon him, and without these poems which he owed to its inspiration, it is doubtful whether his name would ever have been known outside a small circle of enthusiasts. War is, always, a tremendous experience; it makes or mars. It made Whitman. As has already been said in the biographical chapter, the years of the war deepened his whole nature. The rather shallow equalitarian enthusiasms of his earlier life, learnt in the atmosphere of newspapers and political platforms, did not indeed at all disappear. They were in him audible and visible to the last. But, under the stress of the awful struggle, he learnt to rise above all that into a world of higher

values, where the equalities in question are those fundamental ones of birth and death, of hopes and fears and pains, of the stout heart which takes little thought for itself and the love which takes much for others. No soldier who fought in the ranks showed more than Whitman of these greatest of the gifts of war; and the war taught him not only how to do his chosen work in the hospitals, but how to give shape to his thoughts and experiences in some of the noblest war poems which have ever been written. Certainly there are none in the world which are closer to the actual facts: only a few of those written in the Great War can compare with them in the beauty which is afraid of no truth and the truth which in all its nakedness is yet seen to be beauty. And the spirit which the best of our young poets learnt, perhaps for the first time, in the World War is Whitman's spirit: one of charity, and even of humility, as well as of truth and endurance; the spirit in which, in one of these poems, he makes his offering to victorious Liberty:

lo, in these hours supreme,
No poem proud, I chanting bring to thee, nor mastery's rapturous verse,
But a cluster containing night's darkness and blood-dripping wounds,
And psalms of the dead.

All genius has inconsistencies which to the measures of mere logic make it appear untrue to itself. Literature partakes of the variety and fluidity of life, while logic and science have a rigid fixity which, however necessary, seems like death to the free eyes of art. The greatest books of the world, notably those which we call the Bible, are full of pairs of sentences which teach the many-sidedness of truth by daring to stand in flat

contradiction to each other. So here in these *Drum-Taps* we have Whitman returning boldly upon himself. He who had ridiculed war as the forgotten and superseded theme of the poets of the old world sounds its trumpet-call with a note of the most uncompromising insistence:

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

He who had so often praised rebellion, he who had again and again used the language of anarchy, is among the very fiercest in his call for the suppression of a rebellion which had, to say the least, a very strong legal case in its favour. It was not in him to speak ungenerously of the enemy; and he never did. But he had no doubts and no hesitations, and, seeing the right on the side of the Union and Democracy, could call on them to launch all their thunderbolts against the South and to "strike with vengeful stroke". He who had always proclaimed himself the poet of a world of industry and commerce casts all that aside in his *Song of the Banner,* in which Banner and Child and Poet join together to silence the fears and prudences of the father by their outbursts of the "pleasure new and ecstatic" of war:

Child

O my father I like not the houses,
They will never to me be anything, nor do I like money,

But to mount up there I would like, O father dear, that banner I like,
That pennant I would be and must be.

Father

Child of mine you fill me with anguish,
To be that pennant would be too fearful,
Little you know what it is this day, and after this day, forever,
It is to gain nothing, but risk and defy everything,
Forward to stand in front of wars—and O, such wars!—what have you to do with them?
With passions of demons, slaughter, premature death?

Banner

Demons and death then I sing,
Put in all, aye all will I, sword-shaped pennant for war.

And again; it is this time the Poet who speaks:

My limbs, my veins dilate, my theme is clear at last,
Banner so broad advancing out of the night, I sing you haughty and resolute,
I burst through where I waited long, too long, deafen'd and blinded,
My hearing and tongue are come to me, (a little child taught me,)
I hear from above O pennant of war your ironical call and demand,
Insensate! insensate (yet I at any rate chant you,) O banner!

. . . . . .

O you up there! O pennant! where you undulate like a snake hissing so curious,
Out of reach, an idea only, yet furiously fought for, risking bloody death, loved by me,
So loved—O you banner leading the day with stars brought from the night!
Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding all—(absolute owner of all)—O banner and pennant!
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses, machines are nothing—I see them not,
I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,
Flapping up there in the wind.

Assuredly Whitman is no Jingo. The best of the *Drum-Taps* are as full of a great-hearted tenderness embracing friend and foe alike as they are of unflinching patriotism. The great poems of war can no more be written in the spirit of bellicose arrogance than they can in that still more ignoble spirit whose cry is "anything better than war and any country in preference to my own". The fine quality of these poems of Whitman's depends partly on that gift of transcending and reconciling opposites which is found in so many of the greatest of human utterances; in their strange harmonising of the relentlessness of war with the uttermost tenderness of charity and peace.

The first of the *Drum-Taps* are given to the call to war. The two best of them have been partly quoted. The first poems which strike the deeper note, never struck elsewhere quite as Whitman strikes it, is the short and beautiful *By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame,* at once a picture, an imagination, and, what is rarest in the *Leaves,* a work of admirable art. It is, if only for this reason, a greater thing than the more popular poem (*Come up from the Fields, Father*) which follows, though that too is a thing which could only have come from Whitman, being full of that power of vividly realising a scene or situation in which, when he stopped in time, he had few rivals. The next, of the burial of a young soldier, *My Son and my Comrade,* begins and ends with lines of equal beauty: "Vigil strange I kept on the field one night", "And buried him where he fell". Others exceptionally striking among those which follow are *A Sight in Camp,* already quoted [1] in an earlier chapter; the poem of the inscription he

[1] Page 118.

found nailed on a Virginian tree which had a grave at its foot, "Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade", words which one would have liked to see used for a thousand graves in France; the long and daringly detailed poem of the wound dresser, which is himself at work; the noble *Dirge for Two Veterans,*[1] a poem in four-line stanzas and certainly one of the very finest of all; the curious *Ethiopia saluting the Colors,* an old slave-woman rising from the roadside to salute the liberating flag of the Union; the lovely lines of the *Tan-faced Prairie-Boy*[2]; *Reconciliation,*[3] his kiss of the enemy soldier lying "white-faced and still in the coffin", and the beautiful *Look down, Fair Moon,* which has been given[4] in the chapter on his life.

And so we pass to the most famous of all Whitman's poems, the great lyric to the memory of Lincoln. It has no rival among his longer poems; the only one which in any way approaches its sustained lyrical flight is the first of the *Sea-Drift* section, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,* and even of that the approach is not a very near one. There also we have a lyric within a lyric, a bird's song within the song of the poet. And both are wonderful things, things such as had come from no one before Whitman; new in their mingling of freedom and music and passion, each an authentic voice of the innermost mystery of love and of death, its beauty giving sovereign warrant, as for human ears such beauty always will, to the assurance of its truth. But there can be no question which is the greater of the two. Of *Come Lovely and Soothing Death* it is not too much to say that it is one of the great lyrics of the world. Lincoln

[1] Page 112. [2] Page 66. [3] Page 106. [4] Page 37.

was murdered in April 1865, and Whitman never again listened to the birds of spring or looked at its flowers without thinking of the man whom he called his "Captain", "the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands". That is what the poem begins with:

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the door-yard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,
With the tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

He thinks of the towns as well as of the country; of all the states and all the people who are weeping at the sight or the thought of that coffin. And of course he thinks of more than Lincoln, of more than America.

All true poets live in the universal and escape to it, even from those actual and individual occurrences, persons and things which they realise so much more vividly than ordinary men. The particular is more real to them than to the rest of us, but it is always a part of a more real universal. And so Whitman turns from Lincoln's coffin to salute all other coffins, and from death as mere bereavement to something much larger, holier, and happier:

Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you
O sane and sacred death.

And it is the whole, sea and land, farm and street, that he wishes to think of as joining with him and his thrush and his "western orb sailing the heaven" in their enchanted acceptance, nay, even their welcome, of death:

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the
dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

No great man has ever been wept in a nobler elegy; all the nobler because it has in it so much more than the death of one man, as much indeed of nature as of man, as much of life as of death.

It is followed by the three eight-line stanzas, *O Captain! My Captain,* which have already been discussed in connection with their metre, and then by the simple and beautiful lines which begin

Hush'd be the camps to-day,

and end

For the heavy hearts of soldiers.

In the long poem which follows, *By Blue Ontario's Shore,* we pass back to a lower, less universal, world. From the profoundest of the emotions which are shared by the whole of humanity we come to party opinions and a purely American outlook upon life. The poem repeats a great deal of what has already been said in the *Song of Myself,* and the half-dozen similar proclamations which have already been men-

tioned. But it has so far its particular position that it is a summing up of the poet's hopes now that, as he repeats more than once, "the war is over, the field is clear'd". It sets forth the task that, in his view, lies before the "boundless expectant soul" of the States. It cannot be honestly said that that task has been accomplished. There is nothing surprising in that. Poets, who are intenser men than the rest of us, both fear more deeply and hope more confidently than ordinary men. Milton thought an ideal Republic could easily be set up in England at the very moment when the bonfires were being prepared for Charles II. Hugo saw visions for France and Shelley for England, or rather for the world, which so far give little sign of realisation. So we must not be surprised if the America of Whitman's poem, the America in which poets were to count far more than business men and even than Presidents, is after fifty years still concealed behind the America of *Babbitt* and *Martin Arrowsmith*. But no doubt it is there. And it is to "remnants", to the minorities who have survival value and carry in them the seeds of the future, that prophets in all ages, the prophets of culture and intelligence as well as those ancient ones of righteousness, have always had to make their appeal. Whitman's complaint that "the Union" is "always swarming with blatherers" is still painfully true; and if those undesirables swarm even more in America than elsewhere it is partly Whitman's own fault. He, with other Americans who like him had brains enough and character enough to know better, must bear the responsibility of having continually assured ignorance that it is the same thing as knowledge, and promised

to confident sciolism that reward of truth which is only won by those who listen and labour and think. There is a good deal of this sort of thing in *By Blue Ontario's Shore*. The less said of that the better. But there is also its other side. There is the healthiness of Whitman's defiance of sleepy conventionality.

> Who are you that wanted only a book to join you in your nonsense?
>
> Piety and conformity to them that like,
> Peace, obesity, allegiance, to them that like,
> I am he who tauntingly compels men, women, nations,
> Crying, Leap from your seats and contend for your lives!

What he asks of the poet is on the whole healthy asking. The poet is not to be as the "reflectors and the polite", the "importers and obedient persons". He is to ask himself whether his performance "can face the open fields and the seaside". He is, in short, to be like Whitman, who can say of himself:

> I have loved the earth, sun, animals, I have despised riches,
> I have given alms to every one that ask'd, stood up for the stupid and crazy, devoted my income and labor to others,
> Hated tyrants, argued not concerning God, had patience and indulgence toward the people, taken off my hat to nothing known or unknown,
> Gone freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young, and with the mothers of families,
> Read these leaves to myself in the open air, tried them by trees, stars, rivers.

The section called *Autumn Rivulets* has more of the thinker and mystic than of the pure poet. It does not include even one poem which any one could wish to learn by heart unless perhaps *Old Ireland*. But it contains many great sayings which those who try at all to think about life will wish to remember even if they cannot ultimately embrace and assimilate them.

The poet is still trying to get back from the war to "God's calm annual drama", the

Sunrise that fullest feeds and freshens most the soul,
The heaving sea, the waves upon the shore, the musical, strong waves,
The woods, the stalwart trees, the slender, tapering trees,
The liliput countless armies of the grass,
The heat, the showers, the measureless pasturages,
The scenery of the snows, the winds' free orchestra,
The stretching light-hung roof of clouds, the clear cerulean and the silvery fringes,
The high dilating stars, the placid beckoning stars,
The moving flocks and herds, the plains and emerald meadows,
The shows of all the varied lands and all the growths and products.

And to man's drama also, his varied stage of ordinary life:

And the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse of the tavern whence he had lately risen,
And the schoolmistress that pass'd on her way to the school,
And the friendly boys that pass'd, and the quarrelsome boys,
And the tidy and fresh-cheek'd girls, and the barefoot negro boy and girl,
And all the changes of city and country wherever he went.

All the life of animals and of nature:

the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there, and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads,

had always been a part of Whitman's life from earliest childhood, and to that life of peace he is now ready to go back. But his notion of peace is now, less than ever, one of mere acquiescence. This section includes poems addressed to France and Ireland and to "A Foil'd European Revolutionaire"; and, though he has just been helping to put down America's rebels, these poems still repeat his old rebel doctrine:

I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over,
And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind him,
And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

. . . . . .

Did we think victory great?
(*he says to the defeated revolutionary*)
So it is—but now it seems to me when it cannot be help'd, that defeat is great,
And that death and dismay are great.

But his faith and message appeal, of course, to a far wider world than that of politics. Here is a poem in praise of George Peabody, the munificent millionaire. But here is also a *Song of Prudence* in which the kind of prudence praised is that which declares

that the young man who composedly peril'd his life and lost it has done exceedingly well for himself without doubt,
That he who never peril'd his life, but retains it to old age in riches and ease, has probably achiev'd nothing for himself worth mentioning.

And here again is the old all-embracing equality, claiming the very highest, accepting the very lowest, so that in one poem he dares to join himself with "Him that was crucified" and in the next he joins himself with felons and prostitutes:

Inside these breast-bones I lie smutch'd and choked,
Beneath this face that appears so impassive hell's tides continually run,
Lusts and wickedness are acceptable to me,
I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
I feel I am of them—I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

All is equality to his mystic seeing, all is miracle, and all is hope.

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,
Or stand under trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night with any one I love,
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

So the earth and the sea are continually being filled with horrors of death and disease; and yet, you have no sooner shrunk back with loathing at that thought, than you see that, though every mite of earth has perhaps "once form'd part of a sick person", yet

The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,
The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropped from the cow, the colt from the mare,
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,

The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

Several longer poems follow, not united into a section. *Proud Music of the Storm* has only the biographical interest of illustrating his love of music. Of *Passage to India* he once said, rather strangely, "there's more of me, the essential ultimate in me, in that than in any other of the poems". It is difficult to think that this remark is more than the expression of a passing mood. The poem, like a good many others written about this time, notably the *Out from behind the Mask of Autumn Rivulets,* is full of Carlyle, the mystical Carlyle of *Sartor. Passage to India* founds itself on the memory of Columbus and uses him as the symbol of restless man, always, from the days of Adam, repeating "that sad incessant refrain *Wherefore unsatisfied soul?* and *Whither O mocking life?*". And so the travellers and the inventors and the engineers all try to open for him his passage to some new world of content. But though they do their work well, there is something still wanting till "the true son of God shall come singing his songs", and "shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose". He it is who shows the way to that voyage of the soul with which the poem ends:

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

The Sleepers is another long poem of universality and equality, starting from a picture of the equality of sleep

which recalls the famous night scene in *Sartor Resartus*. The poet sees all the sleepers of the world, becomes all of them in turn, dreams their dreams, and lives their waking lives. It is all very characteristic, more perhaps of Whitman's faults than of his finer gifts. We are pulled up in it by ugly words and ugly things, often repeated more than once with that curious air of defiance of good taste and good sense which he often affected. Few of his poems more raise that question: est-ce que toute vérité est bonne a dire? Is there nothing on this earth about which wise men prefer silence to speech? A more original poem is *To think of Time*. It is one of the best statements of Whitman's convictions about personality and immortality, life and death, and is full of Carlyle and Tennyson, or at least of thoughts and words exactly parallel with theirs.

If all came but to ashes of dung,
If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betray'd,

is not more entirely un-Tennysonian in form than it is exactly Tennysonian in thought and even in phrase. But this is not what is most remarkable in *To think of Time*. Its originality lies more in the extraordinary vividness with which here again, as in *Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman seizes and expresses the thought, so difficult for any of us quite to realise, that presently the world will be doing all its doings just as eagerly and actively as it is to-day, only we shall have no part in the doings and no interest in them.

To think the thought of death merged in the thought of materials,
To think of all these wonders of city and country, and others taking great interest in them, and we taking no interest in them.

To think how eager we are in building our houses,
To think others shall be just as eager, and we quite indifferent.

(I see one building the house that serves him a few years, or seventy or eighty years at most,
I see one building the house that serves him longer than that.)

Slow-moving and black lines creep over the whole earth—they never cease—they are the burial lines,
He that was President was buried, and he that is now President shall surely be buried.

He goes on to a curiously realistic picture of the funeral of one of those Broadway stage drivers by the side of whom he loved to sit and enjoy the spectacle of the New York streets, whom he so tenderly visited when they fell upon evil days.

The next section, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, is of much more than biographical interest. It includes two of his finest things and several others of interest. The title indicates its contents. The poems represent the struggle between his Tennysonian faith—

Did you think Life was so well provided for, and Death, the purport of all Life, is not well provided for?—

and that "overweening mocking voice" to which Tennyson also was no stranger, of the "downcast hours" that are as "weights of lead":

Matter is conqueror—matter, triumphant only, continues onward.

His "nearest lover", lying on the bed of death, appeals to him, with a "look out of the eyes", a "mute enquiry":

The sea I am quickly to sail, come tell me,
Come tell me where I am speeding, tell me my destination.

But he can only answer:

I understand your anguish but I cannot help you.

Still, if knowledge fails and faith halts, courage never fails either for himself or for others. He can go unflinching into the unknown, confident that the unknown will be something natural and good.

Darest thou now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?

No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

And another poem gives the answer:

O I see now that life cannot exhibit all to me, as the day cannot,
I see that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death.

In much of all this we hardly escape from prose. But in the title poem and in the *Last Invocation* we have two of Whitman's most beautiful lyrics. Here is the first stanza of the *Whispers*:

Whispers of heavenly death murmur'd I hear,
Labial gossip of night, sibilant chorals,
Footsteps gently ascending, mystical breezes wafted soft and low,
Ripples of unseen rivers, ties of a current flowing, forever flowing,
(Or is it the plashing of tears? the measureless waters of human tears?)

And here is the whole of *Invocation*:

At the last, tenderly,
From the walls of the powerful fortress'd house,
From the clasp of the knitted locks, from the keep of the well-closed doors,
Let me be wafted.

Let me glide noiselessly forth;
With the key of softness unlock the locks—with a whisper,
Set ope the doors O soul.

Tenderly—be not impatient,
(Strong is your hold O mortal flesh,
Strong is your hold O love).

This section also contains what is perhaps Whitman's most ambitious philosophic poem, the *Square Deific,* so much admired by J. A. Symonds and so fully discussed in his book on Whitman. Symonds was a student of philosophy, and there may be more in the poem than mere readers of poetry perceive. But it seems at any rate questionable whether Whitman was not far too ignorant of philosophy to handle with any success these difficult problems of the ultimate realities of Spirit. He shows his philosophic limitations in the first poem of this section where he regards Time and Space as "ties eternal", the only ties which death does not loosen. And so this *Square Deific* seems to be little more than an assertion of the three aspects of the Ultimate as it appears to us: Jehovah or Kronos, who is fate or implacable law; Christ or Hercules, the spirit of help and love; and Satan the spirit of rebellion. The "Square" is completed and the three are somehow reconciled in what Whitman so strangely calls "Santa Spirita". Those who wish to study these conceptions will welcome the help of Symonds. The poem as a poem is of little importance; and of the philosophic importance which Symonds gives it many will think that more comes from him than from Whitman.

The next section is entitled *From Noon to Starry Night.* Naturally as age comes on the poet's thoughts

turn more and more to "night, sleep, death and the stars", which are the last words of this section and are here again, as in all the remaining sections, the inspiration of the finest poems. But both this and those which follow contain also a good many pieces of which nothing need be said except that they repeat the old faith in democracy, equality and industrialism, both with the old sincerity and with the old tendency to lapse into mere journalistic fustian or bathos. They do not often produce poems, though they often contain messages of faith which are about the most inspiring things democracy has ever had said to it, and sometimes provide opportunities for that keenly observant eye of Whitman's noting and recording everything in his vivid way: as in *Faces* where he marks

> the shaved blanch'd faces of orthodox citizens,
> The pure, extravagant, yearning, questioning artist's face.

The poems that are really poems deal with other things than political or even philosophic theories. The most ambitious is perhaps *The Mystic Trumpeter,* one of the few of his poems which he was fond of reading aloud. It is a kind of Walt Whitman version of Dryden's *St. Cecilia* Ode. He lies at night and hears in waking dream the music of all the world past and present: nature and feudalism, love and war, sorrow and "the measureless shame and humiliation of my race"; and finally the prophecy of faith and joy. The poem, as a poem, has no chance at all with *Saint Cecilia.* It has beautiful lines, but nobody could so much as try to learn it by heart. The difference, though fatal to a comparison between the poems, is not all to Whitman's discredit. Perhaps the essence of it is that Dryden

was a great artist but not a man of any great feeling, while Whitman felt very deeply but never realised that without art he could not make others share his feeling. *O Magnet-South* is chiefly remarkable as illustrating Whitman's curious practice, already alluded to, of making apparently autobiographical statements which we know have no foundation in fact. So in this poem he chooses to fancy he had "grown up" in Virginia and coasted off Georgia: assertions which show how cautiously his biographers should use his statements about himself. There are, however, poems in this section which have much more than a biographical interest. One is the three beautiful stanzas called *Old War Dreams,* which are dreams

Of the look at first of the mortally wounded, (of that indescribable look)
Of the dead on their backs with arms extended wide.

It might be one of the *Drum-Taps* but that it is not experience but memory. The other is the spring poem *By Broad Potomac's Shore.* He has just been saying in *Excelsior,* "Who has made hymns fit for the earth? for I am mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole earth"; and here he shows himself aware that such ecstasy can only come of surrender to nature's working. It is above all of the spring, of Edward FitzGerald's spring "so old to speak of, so new to see", that it is born.

By broad Potomac's shore, again old tongue,
(Still uttering, still ejaculating, canst never cease this babble?)
Again old heart so gay, again to you, your sense, the full flush spring returning,
Again the freshness and the odors, again Virginia's summer sky, pellucid blue and silver,
Again the forenoon purple of the hills,

Again the deathless grass, so noiseless soft and green,
Again the blood-red roses blooming.

Perfume this book of mine O blood-red roses!
Lave subtly with your waters every line Potomac!
Give me of you O spring, before I close, to put between its pages!
O forenoon purple of the hills, before I close, of you!
O deathless grass, of you!

Of the remaining poems little need be said. *Songs of Parting* were the last section of the complete edition of the *Leaves* which was brought out in the early eighties. They end with the same words with which, twenty years earlier, he had closed the edition of 1860:

> Remember my words, I may again return,
> I love you, I depart from materials,
> I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.

Sands at Seventy, Good-bye, my Fancy and *Old Age Echoes* were "annexes", as he calls them, added in his last years. In all these there is little that is new and still less that can rank among the work by which he will live. The man remains the same and the artist has learnt nothing. He is no more aware at the very end of the *Leaves* than at their beginning that such stuff as

> The commonplace I sing:
> How cheap is health! how cheap nobility!

cannot be inserted in a book of poems without producing disgust and irritation, or, what is perhaps worse still, the yawns of indifference, boredom or contempt. Many, perhaps the majority, of these final scraps are the merest prose cut into lengths and printed as verse. Perhaps there is only a single poem in all these sections which can claim an unquestioned place in any selection of Whitman's work. That is the beautiful *Camps of Green* in *Songs of Parting*:

Not alone those camps of white, old comrades of the wars,
When as order'd forward, after a long march,
Footsore and weary, soon as the light lessens we halt for the night,
Some of us so fatigued carrying the gun and knapsack, dropping asleep in our tracks,
Others pitching the little tents, and the fires lit up begin to sparkle,
Outposts of pickets posted surrounding alert through the dark,
And a word provided for countersign, careful for safety,
Till to the call of the drummers at daybreak loudly beating the drums,
We rise up refresh'd, the night and sleep pass'd over, and resume our journey,
Or proceed to battle.

Lo, the camps of the tents of green,
Which the days of peace keep filling, and the days of war keep filling,
With a mystic army, (is it too order'd forward? is it too only halting awhile,
Till night and sleep pass over?)

Now in those camps of green, in their tents dotting the world,
In the parents, children, husbands, wives, in them, in the old and young,
Sleeping under the sunlight, sleeping under the moonlight, content and silent there at last,
Behold the mighty bivouac-field and waiting-camp of all,
Of the corps and generals all, and the President over the corps and generals all,
And of each of us O soldiers, and of each and all in the ranks we fought,
(There without hatred we all, all meet.)

For presently O soldiers, we too camp in our place in the bivouac camps of green,
But we need not provide for outposts, nor word for the countersign,
Nor drummer to beat the morning drum.

That stands alone in a desert of prose; or perhaps I should say nearly alone, for *Ashes of Soldiers* has something of the same quality, and *To the Sunset*

Breeze in *Good-bye, my Fancy* something of another quality almost as fine and perhaps even more characteristic.

When he called one of these sections *Sands at Seventy* he was no doubt thinking of the sands of the hour-glass. But there is another suggestion in the word; and there are sands among which *Leaves of Grass* can hardly grow. Still there are those who have felt the genius of Whitman and have learnt for the sake of its greatness to forgive its littleness, and in particular to be patient with its entire lack of humour and of the self-criticism which goes with humour. And they, at any rate, will follow the old man not merely with forgiveness but with gratitude and honour to the end. They will be with him in these last thoughts:

> As the time draws nigh glooming and cloud,
> A dread beyond of I know not what darkens me;

and in the half-sublime and half-ridiculous victory over them:

Wonderful to depart!
Wonderful to be here!

. . . . . .

To be this incredible God I am!
To have gone forth among other Gods, these men and women I love.

They will bow their heads before the "old broken soldier", as he calls himself,

> after a long, hot, wearying march, or haply after battle,
> To-day at twilight, hobbling, answering company roll-call, *Here,* with vital voice,
> Reporting yet, saluting yet the Officer over all.

And when at last they close his book they will not reject the proud claim with which he himself had dared to close it before these last additions were made.

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man.

The poem, *So Long,* in which these words occur was written, it is said, when he was forty. But he printed it last in the last section of his arrangement of the complete *Leaves.* And no two lines are a better summing up of what he was. There have been poets of all ages and countries who, to their immense enrichment, have been bookish men, and have filled their poems with the art and wisdom which are the spoils of learning, and with the memories and associations which link into one unbroken chain all the poetry of all the world. Many of these were fully as much men as Whitman. But for the unlearned their learning is apt a little to hide their humanity. The *Leaves of Grass* have nothing either of the strength or of the weakness of scholarship. The poet in them stands out in them, to his loss and gain, entirely naked. No one fit to read the book has ever doubted that in touching it he instantly touched a man.

CHAPTER VI

THE ULTIMATE REMAINDER

ANY one who reads this book will be in a position to form his own opinion of Whitman. I have quoted very freely indeed of his best, and have not been very sparing in illustrations of his worst. That is, of course, as I see them, both the worst and the best. I can only state the facts as I find them and the conclusions to which I have honestly come. Others, of course, have come to conclusions which differ widely from mine. Some good judges have treated Whitman with mere contempt. Some, like Sir Edmund Gosse, grant that he is "rich above almost all his coevals in the properties of poetry", and yet consider him "for want of a definite shape and fixity" to be "doomed to sit for ever apart from the company of poets"; a judgement the second part of which I am quite unable to understand when I think, if there were nothing else, of certain lyrics of imperishable beauty whose strangeness of form is, to my ears, no more strange than triumphantly felicitous. Others, again, like Mr. Basil de Selincourt, in what is so far as I know the most interesting critical study of Whitman, regard his formal innovations as far more successful than to me they seem to be. I cannot follow Mr. de

Selincourt in his praise of Whitman's endless inventories of things in general. I do not understand how he can prefer the almost formless poems like the *Song of Myself* to those, like the Lincoln elegy, which have some approach to form, or how he can assert that in these "the thought loses its distinctive flavour" because "disciplined language cannot express spontaneous feelings"; which is, I should have supposed, exactly what it has been doing in poetry since the world began; and when he quotes one of the longest, most ungrammatical and most tedious lines in the *Leaves,*

> May-be seeming to me what they are (as doubtless they indeed but seem) as from my present point of view, and might prove (as of course they would) nought of what they appear, or nought anyhow, from entirely changed points of view,

and calls it "in its place pure poetry", I am merely lost in amazement. "Its place" is that of the middle line in a remarkable poem; the one which begins,

> Of the terrible doubt of appearances,
> Of the uncertainty after all, that we may be deluded,

and it divides the first half, of haunting fears, from the second half, of indifference and, more than indifference, of peace, in the presence of the love which answers all doubts. But that this accumulation of confusion was the ideal way of marking that transition is what I cannot believe. Mr. de Selincourt would answer perhaps that it was this way and no other which was typical of Whitman. He seems to argue that to be typical is the most essential of merits in poetry, saying, for instance, that the "passages of conventional melody" in *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* make

it popular but prevent it from being typical. But surely our final concern with poetry is not that it should be typical: the worst of Shakespeare—even the worst of Wordsworth—is often that, and so may be the worthless verse of worthless writers. Our concern is that it should succeed. And until man can take much longer breaths than he can at present, until fact is art, prose poetry, and all words and rhythms of equal value, a line of this length and flatness will not be a success.

And if I cannot think that time is likely to ratify the judgements of those who go furthest in acceptance of Whitman's formal methods, still less can I think it will ratify the extraordinary claims sometimes made for his genius. We have seen that men like John Symonds and York Powell spoke of him as an influence comparable with that of the Bible. Less remarkable men who came into closer contact with him used still stronger language. All through his life his personality had an extraordinary effect upon people. Sometimes it irritated and repelled. But often it fascinated even passing visitors to a degree to which it would not be easy to find a parallel. Sir Edmund Gosse, no facile hero-worshipper, went to see him unwillingly, and was astonished at the "peculiar magic" he could exercise "not on a disciple but on a stiff-necked and froward unbeliever"; so that the unbeliever walked away, after a brief talk, with his "heart full of affection for the beautiful old man". Sir Edmund's word is, as usual, the right one. Only something like "magic" seems adequate to account for the spiritual intoxication which Whitman seems to have more than once produced. His friend Dr. Bucke says that "no descrip-

tion can give any idea of the extraordinary physical attractiveness of the man": and he tells a story of a young man who saw him for a single hour in 1877, only heard him utter about a hundred quite ordinary words, and yet, according to the young man's own account, "shortly after leaving, a state of exaltation set in which he could only describe by comparing it to slight intoxication by champagne, or to falling in love". And this lasted six weeks, during which he was "plainly different from his ordinary self", with the result that Whitman became a permanent force in his life, "making for purity and happiness". So an English doctor who visited him in 1890 records an almost parallel impression. He speaks of the "irresistible magnetism" of Whitman's "sweet aromatic presence, which seemed to exhale sanity, purity and naturalness, and exercised over me an attraction which positively astonished me, producing an exaltation of mind and soul which no man's presence ever did before". And there is other evidence that when the seed fell into soil that suited it, this, or something like this, was the growth that resulted. So in some cases, even when the previous impression gathered from the *Leaves* had been unfavourable, as with the naturalist John Burroughs, actual contact with the man produced an immediate change. Burroughs describes the first and last impression of him as "wonderfully gentle, tender and benignant", which reminds us of Moncure Conway's testimony that he never "heard from those lips a word of irritation or depreciation of any being". We are scarcely surprised to find Burroughs adding that "he always had the look of a man who had just taken a bath", and declaring that

his literary friends sought him chiefly to "bask in his physical and psychical sunshine". Another interesting remark made by Burroughs is that "his face had none of the eagerness, sharpness, nervousness, of the modern face": "like the faces of the Greeks," it expressed "repose, harmony and command", while the large and loose mouth expressed another side of his nature and "required the check and curb of that classic brow". All this is the picture of no ordinary man. But a man's personality is one thing, his work another. It is very interesting, for us who did not know Whitman, to hear of the impression he made upon those who did. But our business now is with the work he left behind him. In a man's lifetime lucky or unlucky personal characteristics often lead to his receiving more praise, or less, than his achievement deserved. But the function of later criticism is to take the book, or other work, and judge it as it is, apart from all prejudices of personal liking or disliking. So we must ignore altogether, in Whitman's case, the extravagances of those who, fresh from his presence, give utterance to such assertions as that of Dr. Bucke, who, in other respects, it seems, a sensible man, declared that the two parts of *Faust* and *Dichtung und Wahrheit* taken together "fall far short" of the work of Whitman: after which we are scarcely surprised to learn that Whitman stands above Aristotle, Newton, Sophocles, Leonardo and Bacon, even if Bacon wrote the plays ascribed to Shakespeare!

With flights of this sort sober criticism has obviously nothing at all to do. They merely prove that Whitman, like some other men of genius, had the power of so exciting his followers as sometimes to deprive them

almost altogether of their senses. And even where the materials for forming a judgement were less wanting than they evidently were here, even when the critic is a man of learning like Symonds or other Englishmen of that time whose testimonies I have quoted, we can now see that the novelty of the work, and still more the magic of the man, led to assertions which seem absurd to-day in the perspective already provided by the lapse of years. There is nothing exceptional in this. Equally good judges placed Scott in his day, and Tennyson in his, by the side of Shakespeare.

What, then, in the case of Whitman does the perspective of time allow us to see? Well, above all, after all these exaggerations have been put aside, it certainly allows us, as I have said, to see a man of genius. Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie has recently spoken of Whitman as having created "out of the wealth of his noble experience that vividly personal figure which is surely one of the few supremely great things in modern poetry—the figure of himself". Only genius creates "supremely great figures", and only genius provides itself with the material for them. So, though Mr. Abercrombie does not use that word, he implies it. It is impossible to define genius, but I do not envy the man who, however irritated by Whitman's crudities, fails to find in him that uniqueness of vital and vitalising energy of spirit which always accompanies it in whatever form it appears. Then there is always novelty in genius and in none more than in Whitman's. He and his poetry were not all that he wished them to be and often thought they were. But it can hardly be denied that in them for the first time the native and original genius of the United States of America found

authentic, though no doubt not perfect, expression. It is true that many of the ideas on which he most insisted are already present in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. And it is likely enough that Whitman was originally inspired by Emerson, though after the two men had come to feel their essential differences at least as much as what they had in common, Whitman would say that his work owed nothing to the influence of Emerson. That was a natural reaction perhaps from the sense of the debt he owed to Emerson's instant and generous praise of the first edition of the *Leaves*. And no doubt it was not made the less natural by the fact, that, as we have seen, Emerson never publicly followed up his private praise of Whitman. The two men, in fact, were in important respects very unlike. It was not merely that Emerson was a man of academic culture. It was not even merely that he could not understand or consort easily with plain uneducated people. A still more marked contrast lay in the fact that he had little of the sensuous in him and did not understand how in Whitman the human, and even the physical, constantly took precedence of the intellectual. Emerson's great gifts were those proper to the author's study, the professor's chair, the pulpit of the preacher. Whitman's had more alloy but they were of the more universal order whose home is in the open air or in the life and business of all men, and that is much the same thing as saying that he was a man of greater genius. Nor will it do, I think, to say, as is sometimes said, that Whitman's almost exact contemporary, Herman Melville, had more of genius than he. *Moby Dick* is a book full of great things, which give fine expression to an imagination which is at home

in both the worlds, the spiritual and the physical alike. But does any one think such things possess the newness, the uniqueness, either of *Come Lovely and Soothing Death* or of the *Song of Myself?* Could any one think of speaking of its author as we have seen wise men speaking of Whitman?

More, then, than any of these, as it seems to me, Whitman is the genius of America. And, if that is so, no admitted limitations can justify Europeans in ignoring him. To be the voice of a nation is a great achievement, and the greater the nation the greater the achievement. It may be plausibly argued that Whitman holds that glory in a unique degree. Is there a Greek who represents the whole of Greece, a Frenchman who represents the whole of France, or an Englishman, even Shakespeare himself, who represents the whole of England, as Whitman represents the whole of the United States, and every man and woman of every class within their borders?

Then there is another position, less certain but perhaps still greater, which may be claimed for him. Who has been a greater voice of the ideal which the word democracy tries to suggest? How much saner and healthier, both physically and morally, he is than Rousseau! How much wider meaning he gives to the idea than could be given by such political orators as Bright! How he towers, by imagination, by vision, by the joy of the body and the joy of the soul, over such a dull materialist as Marx! Of what immeasurably finer and freer-flowing metal he is made than those mixtures of the cruel tyrant and the narrow doctrinaire whom we have seen during the last few years in Russia, cloaking their despotism with names stolen from the

language of freedom and democracy! The only great democratic figure who can rival him as an embodiment of the true democratic faith is his own hero, Lincoln, who saw him from a window, asked who he was, and said, "Well, he looks like a MAN"; of whom he, in his turn, said things unforgettable and immortal.

No doubt he shows, as we have already seen, a good many of the defects of the democratic temperament. He is the most exuberant of the "blatherers" with whom democracies have, as he was half aware, always swarmed. He "screams, brags, swears, blusters" as even Symonds admits; he "thumps the pulpit cushion", with the usual result of such thumping; the most crying defect of the *Leaves* is their continual lapses into the forcible feeble. The culture which he despised would have saved him from that, as it would have saved him from such absurdities as despising "the small theatre of the antique and the aimless sleep-walking of the Middle Ages" in comparison with the achievements of his own age and country. After all it is only culture that can provide us with standards, and without such standards, whose rigid measure democracy is apt to resent, one is liable to fall into follies of this sort, or into supposing, as Whitman supposed, that there is "nothing grander" as "a result of faith in humankind" than "a well-contested American national election", the voting in which he has the courage in one of his poems to compare to "a still small voice", of all things in the world, and the voting papers to "countless snowflakes falling"! These are the limitations and defects of the democratic temperament. But I do not think they prevent Whitman from being one of the sincerest, healthiest and, except

Mazzini, perhaps even the loftiest, of all the voices of democracy. The faith of it is written, as we have seen, all over his poetry, not always wisely, still less always modestly, but always with the passionate sincerity of a man whose creed sprang from his heart and was to be seen every day overflowing into his life. How many better statements are there of that creed than his prose *Democratic Vistas* and parts of his Preface to the *Leaves?*

And if he exhibits some of the weaknesses of democratic enthusiasts, there are others, not the least common, from which he is singularly free. He would probably have agreed with what Mr. Page, the United States Ambassador to England during the war, said when speaking of the late W. J. Bryan and people of his sort: "It's the common man we want, and the uncommon common man when we can find him; never the crank", a remark, by the way, as true in literature as in politics. Anyhow, after middle life at any rate, Whitman was the opposite of a "crank", laughing at his early bigotries of anti-slavery, anti-capital punishment and teetotalism, and even confessing to "a latent toleration for the people who choose a reactionary course", however far he was from choosing such a course himself. So in spite of his self-chosen poverty he declares in the *Vistas* that democracy looks "with ill-satisfied eye upon the very poor and on those out of business" and asks for men and women "well off, owners of houses and acres, and with cash in the bank". Nor was he, like so many democrats, at all a peace-at-any-price man, as he showed in the war. Indeed he may be said to have been something of what we should now call an Imperialist, for he advocated the annexation of Russian

America, Cuba, Mexico and Canada to the United States! And much of *Democratic Vistas* is given to a very open-eyed denunciation of those very States and their institutions which in his poetry he commonly sees only through such rose-coloured spectacles. He speaks with terrible frankness of "the appalling dangers of universal suffrage" in a country entirely without a native intellectual life or a literature of its own, where society is "crude and rotten", the business classes "depraved", the official classes "saturated in corruption". He declares that "Democracy grows rankly up (by which he means 'produces') the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all", and that between the "absence, or perhaps the singular abeyance, of moral conscientious fibre all through American society", the "incredible flippancy and blind fury of parties" and the entire lack of first-class captains and leaders, the "problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast". Some of these evils are partly cured since Whiteman wrote: others remain, and not only in America: and, as he says, "in downcast hours the soul thinks they always will remain". But, as he immediately adds, "it soon recovers from such sickly moods". For the machinery of democracy he cares nothing. It is the spirit of it pervading the whole of a people which in his view is important; for that, as he sees it, is a trainer of "immortal souls". The *Vistas* are a prolonged call for a new order of poets without whom neither America nor democracy, which he hardly distinguishes, can come to any growth of ultimate significance. The poet alone can be the voice of "the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat—and solving all lesser and definite

distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power". The poet alone can convey the spirit which can solve the great problems of democracy, reconciling the solidarity of society with the independence of the individual, the largest freedom with the strictest law. For, if he is a real poet, he is the most authoritative voice of "religion (sole worthiest elevator of man or State)" which is "at the core of democracy" and alone can breathe into it "the breath of life". Whitman rests his faith on the soul of goodness which, however concealed, warped, weakened by a thousand faults, he had in the war seen alive and at work in the plain man at least as much as in his officer. The thought that is at the root of *Calamus* was one of no mere private interpretation. It reappears in the *Vistas* where he pleads in prose for "intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man", and declares that he confidently expects a time when "manly friendship fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and lifelong", will be "carried to degrees hitherto unknown"; and adds that it is "to the general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivalling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature)" that he looks for "the counter-balance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy and for the spiritualisation thereof".

No one, believer or unbeliever, can deny that all this, and the rest of *Democratic Vistas,* forms one of the most inspiring of all statements of the democratic faith. But there is a still finer statement, more characteristic because less political of what is really the same ideal, in the Preface to the *Leaves.*

This is what you shall do: love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labour to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence towards the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these *Leaves* in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul: and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body.

Few of us can even try to put all those words into practice: few of us, perhaps, think every one of them wise or even true But none of us can be blind to the greatness of their inspiring spirit. The man who wrote them was a son of the prophets of whom democracy has not had too many. Let her never fail to cherish and honour the memory of this one.

So much, then, we see, or think we see, clearly in Walt Whitman; a man of genius who was, first, as few men have ever been, the spokesman of a whole nation, and then, a thing perhaps greater still, the prophet and evangelist of a great idea. But that is not all we see. Whitman was a writer. He practised two kindred but separate arts: he wrote verse and he wrote prose. Enough has been said in previous chapters both of the genius and of the stupidities, the wonders of power and beauty and the wonders of flatness and ugliness, which make the business of reading his verse a series of contradictory experiences.

I suppose any honest critic who comes to him fresh from even a very moderate acquaintance with the great literature of the world must go through alternations of wonder and disgust. His incongruities and inequalities are staring facts of continual occurrence. The same ear and imagination which were fine enough to create the bird's song in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* were also so extraordinarily dull as to be able in the middle of an impassioned love poem, to make the lover address his waiting bride in a phrase of such hideous cacophony and absurd associations as "O tender waiter"! These contrasts of inconsistency make it peculiarly difficult to hold fast to one clear-cut impression of him. I have not attempted to conceal my own experience of that difficulty. I need not repeat my conclusions. I can only sum them up once more by saying that I find in Whitman, first, a great poet who often wrote dull and ugly nonsense, and, secondly, the prophet and pioneer of free verse who triumphed in it as not even the best of his followers have triumphed and failed as scarcely the worst have failed. It seems to me that in his resolve to deliver verse from the hard Egyptian bondage of a few forms and models he was right and partly succeeded, and has paved the way for the success of others. On the other hand his attempt to make the naked sentence do the work of the line seems to me to fail; and so, quite as much, does his attempt to make the unpurged ordinariness of journalism take the place of the rarities and originalities of poetry. Those sought-out harmonies of sound and meaning and association, those difficult discoveries of the word or phrase which is to astonish us by its combination of new meaning and

old authority, and to appeal to ear and memory and mind all at once, are not to be replaced by any such easy and haphazard methods. So, in every way, success and failure are strangely mixed, and I think that even a selection of his best work would contain frequent exhibitions of these failures together with some of the rarest poetry written in English during the nineteenth century.

I am trying in this chapter to sum up the ultimate remainder as it were of Whitman; so perhaps I ought to add a few words about his prose. It is with him as with so many poets; with Milton, with Wordsworth, with Shelley; fine as his best prose is, it would probably have been little heard of if it had not been for his poetry. And certainly the bulk of it is mere crude journalism, which only unusually foolish and unusually officious disciples could have been unkind enough to restore to the light of day. Much even of what is better than that, like the collection of his letters to his mother and to Pete Doyle, is almost as ejaculatory and spasmodic as his verse, and therefore, being prose, which is much less patient of tricks than verse, is rather tiresome to read at any length. But in the arts no number of blunders or failures outbalances a single success. Prior may write a hundred *Solomons*; they cannot hurt his *Child of Quality*. And not all Whitman's crude journalism and crude criticism can prevent such a passage as that I just now quoted from the Preface to the *Leaves* from being a great thing greatly said.

But perhaps the part of his prose which may prove to be of most universal appeal is to be found in nothing political or propagandist, nothing written directly for

the public, but among the notes which he made for himself from time to time and ultimately arranged for publication under the title *Specimen Days*. They are of all sorts, from plain accounts of some of the facts of his life to very tender and moving records of his experiences among the soldiers in the hospitals. Of his manner of handling plain facts no better example can be given than his account of Lincoln's second Inauguration:

March 4th. The President very quietly rode down to the capitol in his own carriage, by himself, on a sharp trot, about noon, either because he wish'd to be on hand to sign bills, or to get rid of marching in line with the absurd procession, the muslin temple of liberty and pasteboard monitor. I saw him on his return, at three o'clock, after the performance was over. He was in his plain two-horse barouche, and look'd very much worn and tired; the lines, indeed, of vast responsibilities, intricate questions, and demands of life and death, cut deeper than ever upon his dark brown face; yet all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness, underneath the furrows. (I never see that man without feeling that he is one to become personally attach'd to, for his combination of purest, heartiest tenderness and native western form of manliness.) By his side sat his little boy, of ten years. There were no soldiers, only a lot of civilians on horseback, with huge yellow scarfs over their shoulders, riding around the carriage.

There are only a few words in this that could not have been written by anybody. Yet the whole leaves an impression of a kind of greatness and simplicity, not altogether unfit to be the picture of the man who made the speech at Gettysburg. But of all the prose Whitman wrote, what gives me, at any rate, most pleasure did not come till later; not till after his recovery, or partial recovery, from the long illness

which began in 1873. It is with his prose as with his verse. He becomes a much greater man after the beginning of the war. I at least cannot doubt (though Mr. de Selincourt not only doubts but denies) that Whitman was entirely right in his assertion that he and his poetry owed an almost immeasurable debt to what he calls the "sudden, vast, terrible, direct and indirect stimulus" of the war, and to the "emotional depths it sounded" in him. In any case there can be no doubt of the fine quality of some of his later prose. The best of it was written during his visits to his friends the Staffords, and was inspired by the solitary hours he spent in his beloved Timber Creek. He says it was to his life there that he may have owed his "partial recovery from the prostration of 1874-75". Nature, or nature and friendship, made his whole life there, and when he takes up his pen after his illness it is to Nature that he at once turns:

> After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on—have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear—what remains? Nature remains; to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the changes of seasons—the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night. We will begin from these convictions. Literature flies so high and is so hotly spiced, that our notes may seem hardly more than breaths of common air, or draughts of water to drink. But that is part of our lesson.

"Nature remains"; and affinities of men and women with nature and with each other. That is the best subject of his prose as of his poetry. The best of the prose and poetry are closely akin; and even the briefest attempt to record his genius would be incomplete

without some mention of these beautiful passages of prose, great in their affinity to the words of all other mystics and lovers of nature, great also in their uniqueness, in the presence within of qualities that are "Walt's" and his alone.

I will end by quoting a few of them. Here is, first of all, a piece of pure observation, not indeed observation of the strict scientific sort; that was not Whitman's gift or business. Indeed he says somewhere that it is best "not to know too much or to be too precise about birds and trees and flowers"; he thinks that "a certain free margin, and even vagueness . . . helps your enjoyment of these things". Still this little piece shows him ready enough to take trouble, watch and record his experience: only his observation is of the free sort, after the fashion of Dorothy Wordsworth, the only fashion which matters for poetry, the fashion in which the joy of it, and the sympathy, are at least as plain as the patience and the accuracy; while the imagination is at any rate never quite asleep.

Did you ever chance to hear the midnight flight of birds passing through the air and darkness overhead, in countless armies, changing their early or late summer habitat? It is something not to be forgotten. A friend called me up just after 12 last night to mark the peculiar noise of unusually immense flocks migrating north (rather late this year). In the silence, shadow and delicious odor of the hour, (the natural perfume belonging to the night alone,) I thought it rare music. You could *hear* the characteristic motion—once or twice "the rush of mighty wings," but often a velvety rustle, long drawn out—sometimes quite near—with continual calls and chirps and some song-notes. It all lasted from 12 to 3. Once in a while the species was plainly distinguishable; I could make out the bobolink, tanager, Wilson's thrush, white-crown'd

sparrow, and occasionally from high in the air came the notes of the plover.

This has a special interest as illustrating what all his friends record of the exceptional acuteness of his powers of hearing and smell.

My next selection is a thing perhaps still more characteristic, redolent of his beloved common earth, the earth of all men:

The soil, too—let others pen-and-ink the sea, the air, (as I sometimes try)—but now I feel to choose the common soil for theme—naught else. The brown soil here, (just between winter-close and opening spring and vegetation)—the rain-shower at night, and the fresh smell next morning—the red worms wriggling out of the ground—the dead leaves, the incipient grass, and the latent life underneath—the effort to start something—already in shelter'd spots some little flowers—the distant emerald show of winter wheat and the rye fields—the yet naked trees, with clear interstices, giving prospects hidden in summer—the tough fallow and the plow-team, and the stout boy whistling to his horses for encouragement—and there the dark fat earth in long slanting stripes upturn'd.

And here is the sick man sitting among the falling autumn leaves; "yellow and black and pale and hectic red": simpler in what he makes of them than Shelley and much less sad; but he also not without thoughts which pass like Shelley's beyond the sight before his eyes:

Cloudy and coolish; signs of incipient winter. Yet pleasant here, the leaves thick-falling, the ground brown with them already; rich coloring, yellows of all hues, pale and dark-green, shades from lightest to richest red—all set in and toned down by the prevailing brown of the earth and gray of the sky. So, winter is coming; and I yet in my sickness. I sit here amid all these fair sights

and vital influences, and abandon myself to that thought, with its wandering trains of speculation.

Then, a few days later, more, and more mystical, speculations; happiness beyond speech and a wondering guess as to where it comes from.

I don't know what or how, but it seems to me mostly owing to these skies, (every now and then I think, while I have of course seen them every day of my life, I never really saw the skies before,) have had this autumn some wondrously contented hours—may I not say perfectly happy ones? . . .

. . . . . .

What is happiness, anyhow? Is this one of its hours, or the like of it?—so impalpable—a mere breath, an evanescent tinge? I am not sure—so let me give myself the benefit of the doubt. Hast Thou, pellucid, in Thy azure depths, medicine for case like mine? (Ah, the physical shatter and troubled spirit of me the last three years.) And dost Thou subtly mystically now drip it through the air invisibly upon me?

One more passage, the last: this time a night piece, of close kinship with what we have just read:

I sit by the pond, everything quiet, the broad polish'd surface spread before me—the blue of the heavens and the white clouds reflected from it—and flitting across, now and then, the reflection of some flying bird. Last night I was down here with a friend till after midnight; everything a miracle of splendor—the glory of the stars, and the completely rounded moon—the passing clouds, silver and luminous-tawny—now and then masses of vapory illuminated scud—and silently by my side my dear friend. The shades of the trees, and patches of moonlight on the grass—the softly blowing breeze, and just-palpable odor of the neighbouring ripening corn—the indolent and spiritual night, inexpressibly rich, tender, suggestive—something altogether to filter through one's soul, and nourish and feed and soothe the memory long afterwards.

A lady who knew Whitman well for many years spoke once of his habit of regarding "everything in God's universe" with "wonder, reverence, acceptance and love". That is the mood we see him in here; we cannot leave him in a better or a happier. It came upon him often in solitude; if others were with him when it came, he could not, as that same lady records, be got to speak. It belonged, of course, to his innermost being, and was no doubt closely connected with the constant thankfulness which he once declared to be "the best item" in his work, and with that strong "religious sentiment" which, as this witness and several others record, "pervaded and dominated" his whole life. That "religious sentiment", or religion, was not perhaps one which would be available for ordinary men. And it did not keep Whitman (as what religion does?) from speaking with irritation and contempt of other people's religions which he had never possessed and had never made any effort to understand. But that his faith was one worth having and was at the root of his life no one can doubt. It made him love men—not mankind, but ordinary people of every day—as few men of any sort have loved them; and of men of genius, perhaps, fewest of all. It made him live not only in love, but also in the other two gifts of Wordsworth's trinity, in hope and admiration too. But admiration is too weak a word. He lived in wonder which, the wise man said, was the beginning of religion. His whole attitude all through towards man and towards nature was one coloured and inspired by wonder, hope, joy and love. He could not always find language which could capture and preserve what he thought and felt. It often flowed away and was

lost. But not always. This little book contains, I hope, evidence enough that he had moments, not very infrequent moments, in which he was able to give unforgettable utterance to unforgettable experiences; to those experiences, now of vision and ecstasy never before seen, now of simplicities daily seen and passed by, through which poets pass to the possession of secrets of ultimate reality the revelation of which to the world, so far as revelation is possible, is their art, their business and their delight.

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